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John Oman: Orkney's Theologian

A contextual study of John Oman's theology with reference to personal freedom as the unifying principle

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Dedication

In memory of two Oman scholars and ministers in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland

Rev'd Walter Russell Entrican B.A. 1903-1984

Rev'd David Andrew Gibb Milligan B.A. 1921- 2006

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the two ministers to whom this thesis in dedicated, Walter Entrican and David Milligan, for introducing me to the work of John Oman. In 1976, on becoming a student for the ministry in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, both ministers encouraged me to read Oman's books. Though my reading in theology has been varied over the years many times I have returned to Oman on the subject of religion and theology. I have, however, never quite understood his place in theological tradition.

I am grateful, therefore, to Rev'd Dr. Ruth Page for encouraging me to undertake this belated study. Dr. Page supervised my B.D. Dissertation in 1981 on Oman's understanding of doctrine and its relation to religious experience. Rev'd Professor David Fergusson must be thanked for accepting me as a post-graduate student and encouraging me over the past three years. Dr Fergusson's suggestion of a contextual approach has proved most helpful in bringing Oman's thinking into clearer relief. Further, as my advisor of studies his steadying hand, critical mind and ready availability has been vital to the enterprise. I would add that the limitations of the work are entirely my own.

I am grateful to the staff at New College library, Edinburgh, Kirkwall library in Orkney and Westminster College library, Cambridge, for their helpfulness with source material and books.

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I composed this thesis, the work is my own. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or qualification.

Name…….. Date……

Abstract

This thesis is a contextual study of the work of Orkney theologian John Oman (1860-1939), with reference to personal freedom as the unifying principle. Oman's early life in Orkney, his philosophical awakening in Edinburgh and his wide reading of European thought are the contexts explored. From these contexts emerges a theology that is eclectic in nature and which finds coherence in the principle of personal freedom. Oman's concept of freedom is defined theologically, metaphysically and personally; this is followed by discussion of its application to the specific subject areas of Christology and Ecclesiology. The priority that Oman gives to personal freedom results in a distinctive theology of Christ and the Church. Thus, the uniqueness of Christ lies in the freedom which he exemplifies in humanity; and the Church is a community of freedom transcending institutional expression. The thesis concludes that Oman's *sui generis* theology is the outcome of the heritage of freedom gifted in various contexts. However, this heritage of freedom was radicalised by Oman, as he developed his own theological vision.

Key words: Orkney; Scottish philosophy, European theology, Christology, Church.

Introduction

This thesis explores two related aspects of the theology of John Oman: context and unifying principle.

The context of Oman's life and thought has received only summary attention in previous studies. Oman himself gives little aid to the reader because of his minimal use of reference and footnote text. However, with detective work a picture emerges of Oman as a discerning interpreter of the theological and philosophical traditions of Europe from the Reformation through to the early twentieth century. The more immediate imprint of his Orkney roots and Scottish education are, also, significant to any contextual evaluation of his work. The net result is a complex theological narrative drawing upon many and varied ideas, but, always having the stamp of his own individuality.

The second and related theme is the principle of personal freedom that stands at the centre of Oman's work. Oman exercises an amazing personal freedom in the marshalling of diffuse ideas into a coherent whole. He is prisoner to no school of thought and the mark of personal creativity is the main characteristic of his work. Oman's radical freedom is predicated upon freedom at the heart of reality. The universe is not impersonal process but a work of love; God's sovereign love works in all and through all. The ability to consciously participate in the loving purposes of God is the image of God in humanity; and the participation of the natural in the supernatural signifies the sacramental nature of the universe.

Starting from this ontology, Oman recognises no imperative greater than the voice of God speaking through experience and no calling higher than to experience freedom in the love of God. To speak of personal freedom is to speak of what belongs supremely to God and derivatively to humanity. The outcome is a radical theology respectful of tradition but not determined by it, a cruciform spirituality that trusts in God's love when the world denies it and a faith that welcomes freedom as, at once, a gift and a challenge. At the Cross the love at the heart of the universe suffers in order to honour human freedom and is victorious even at the point of heart breaking loss.

Oman's unifying principle of personal freedom has, therefore, a large remit, bringing coherence to complexity and unity to difference, not just in his work but in a spiritual universe.

Scriptural references are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible unless otherwise indicated.

Thesis Outline

The first three chapters are investigative, probing spheres of belonging and the genesis of ideas. Chapter one focuses the importance of Oman's Orkney roots. In previous studies, Stephen Bevans refers to Oman's Orkney heritage,[1] but otherwise it has been peripheral in Oman scholarship. In this thesis, Bevans' biographical summary is widened and deepened. The nature of the United Presbyterian Church, its confessional liberalism, its ecclesial reality in Orkney, its main theologian, John Cairns: these, it is argued, were seminal influences upon Oman.

Chapter two deals with an unexplored area in Oman's background, that is, with his philosophical awakening. At seventeen, Oman came to Edinburgh University to study medicine; but his study took a new direction through the impact of the trial for heresy of William Robertson Smith. This point is well documented by Oman himself and in Oman scholarship. Significantly, however, after the trial Oman turned to the study of philosophy and, so, began a formative period in his intellectual development. Oman's, hitherto unidentified, teachers of philosophy – Henry Calderwood, Alexander Campbell Fraser and Andrew Seth Pringle Pattison – were a strong influence on an enquiring mind. These were major thinkers in the changing climate of Scottish philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century. It was an era when the realism of Reid, was challenged by neo-Hegelianism; and, idealism, in turn, was brought under the critique of personal idealism. It will be argued that this context introduced Oman to the significance of personal freedom and it remained at the centre of his theology. Particular lines of continuity are noted between Oman's

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[1] Stephen Bevans *John Oman and his Doctrine of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 6-17. Bevans adds to the previous biographical information given by George Alexander in "Memoir of the Author", in the posthumous *Honest Religion*, John Oman, *Honest Religion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941), xv –xl.

theology and the philosophy of his teachers; and, further, his work is also compared with the older dualism of John Veitch and the contemporaneous ethical idealism of William Ritchie Sorley. It is argued that Oman's contribution to philosophy of religion has deep roots in the varied philosophical culture of late nineteenth century Scotland.

The Scottish connection to Oman's work, however, is not emphasised to the exclusion of the European. Chapter three, therefore, draws attention to Oman's deep understanding of German and French thought. The Kerr Lectures, published as *Faith and Freedom* in 1906,[2] reveal Oman to be an encyclopaedic student and independent thinker, even from this early point in his academic career. Oman looked upon the whole European tradition from the Reformation through the Enlightenment to the twentieth century as the great spiritual heritage of the modern world. It was a heritage rent apart by the division, indeed hostility, between faith and freedom. Oman traces the struggle between faith and freedom, sometimes with freedom in the ascendant to the detriment of faith and at other times *vice versa.* Oman's lectures follow the ebb and flow of faith and freedom from Luther to Pascal, from Kant to Hegel and from Schleiermacher to Ritschl, each of whom pushed the boundaries one direction or the other. The scarred history of Europe and the deep need for reconciliation between these warring poles in human experience set the agenda for Oman's life's work.

The second half of the thesis is interpretative and critical, examining how Oman's concept of personal freedom functions overall in his theology. Chapter four looks at the wide implications of freedom for theology, metaphysics and personality. The priority Oman gave to personal freedom led to his revision of the Reformation theology of grace, with the result that it was recast in personal rather than instrumental terms. Furthermore, the remit of freedom extends beyond personal relations. Oman regarded freedom as being as fundamental to cosmology as to persons. The *bête noir* for Oman is determinism, whether materialistic, theological or philosophical. The ontology on which the universe rests has freedom at its core: all

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[2] See primary sources below.

of creation moves in freedom and order towards fulfilment in the sovereign purposes of divine love.

Analysis of the nature and function of freedom leads to a discussion of Christology in chapter five. Personal freedom is perceived as inconsistent with a magisterial Christology in the classical sense. Oman's Christology takes a radical turn in the assertion that it is the freedom of Christ, and the freedom to which he calls his disciples, that marks him as a unique human being and an icon of the divine. Oman's radical conclusions about Christ are predicated on his belief that the universe evolves spiritually as well as materially and there can be no historical finality in revelation. New levels of meaning are ever being discovered as the problems of the world are addressed in the light of the transcendent. The Cross is the most significant historical instance of the meeting of above and below, the material and the spiritual, and Oman's Christology is, thus, fundamentally cruciform. Christ clarifies the omnipresent revelation of love in and through creation; and this he does in the only way possible, which is by reconciliation to the demand and call of love in his own life and in death. The model of clarification and fulfilment is reminiscent of the philosophical theism of Campbell Fraser.

What pertains to Christology applies also to Oman's ecclesiology. In chapter six, it is shown that the philosophy of the empirical and the ideal, of the natural and the supernatural, that directs Oman's Christology is determinative also of his understanding of the Church. However, in addition to evolution and philosophy Oman draws upon the idea of the apocalyptic. For Oman, apocalyptic imagery in the Bible presents a philosophy of history that is open and teleological. The Church stands between heaven and earth, but its leaning is heavenward. What this means for the Church in practice is explored under the headings: institutions, ministry and sacraments. Oman practical theology reflects his non-conformist tradition, but with significant radicalisation.

The final chapter reviews the contextual aspects of the thesis. Oman was a Scottish and a European thinker. When contextual influences are given due recognition, more obscure aspects of Oman's thought are better understood. Further, Oman's emphasis on personal freedom brings coherence to work that is far-ranging, eclectic in its

method and *sui generis* in the field of theology. Personal freedom and context are related; Oman both inherited the idea of personal freedom and developed it. In Oman's work freedom is more than a personal quality; it is the primary ontological link to the author of being, ever to be realised anew and always transcending its greatest earthly realisation.

Secondary Sources

There have been to date five published studies of Oman work. Francis George Healey provided the earliest in *Religion Reality*: *The Theology of John Oman*, published in 1965.[3] It is an exposition of Oman's main themes and an important introduction to Oman's work. Healy offers a good analysis of Oman's concept of freedom with respect to the natural world and to the supernatural. Where this thesis goes beyond Healey is in ascribing a magisterial position to freedom over and above the other facets of Oman's thought; the ontology of freedom becomes the unifying principle of Oman's work and his vision.

An earlier study by George Grant, an Oxford D.Phil. Thesis, completed in 1950, was not published until 2000 in Volume One of his *Collected Works*.[4] Grant's study shows how Oman's philosophy of the natural and the supernatural proves to be fundamental to his theology. However, Grant makes no reference to Scottish philosophy and his references to European thinkers tread well worn paths, in the footsteps of Kant, Schleiermacher and Ritschl. A wider angle on influences in Oman's work would have enriched this thorough exposition of Oman's thought. Nevertheless, the recent availability of this study to a public readership will greatly enhance understanding of Oman.

Stephen Bevans' monograph, *John Oman's Doctrine of God*,[5] published in 1992, brings Oman into the field of ecumenical study. It has the great merit of a Catholic perspective and evaluation of a firmly rooted Protestant thinker. Bevans' highlights

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[3] F. G. Healy, *Religion and Reality: The Theology of John Oman* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1965).

[4] George Grant, *Collected Works, Volume One* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2000), 157-401.

[5] Stephen Bevans, *John Oman's Doctrine of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

how important God as a *personal* reality is for the architecture of Oman's theology. Bevan's accommodation of Oman within a Catholic sensibility, however, misses something of the radical edge to Oman's thinking. The logic of Oman's radical focus on freedom points in the direction of religious pluralism, a point recognised by John Hick.[6]

A lesser known study of Oman is found in Joan Crewdson's, *Christian Doctrine in the light of Michael Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge: a personalist theology* published in 1994.[7] Crewdson compares Oman and Polanyi highlighting the strong similarities in their emphasis on the personal nature of knowledge. Crewdson's monograph includes a good review of how the personal focus of Oman's epistemology informs his theology of divine-human relations.

Another study of the experiential aspect of Oman's theology was published in 2003. Adam Hood's *Baillie, Oman and Macmurry: Experience and Religious Belief* [8] is a comprehensive account of Oman's epistemology. Hood offers an evaluation and validation of Oman's theology of experience, answering some contemporary critics. The argument of this thesis that personal freedom is the unifying principle in Oman's thought is complementary to the work of Hood and Crewdson. Personal knowledge is the corollary of personal freedom.

The above studies in their varied approaches elucidate Oman's published work; and this study with its focus on context and freedom provides new angles on already well established themes. In addition, the exploration of the nineteenth century context and the postulate that personal freedom is the unifying principle of Oman's theology opens new horizons on the subjects of ontology, Christology and the Church.

A recent study, *John Oman: New Perspectives,* is awaited.[9]

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[6] John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), 7, 116, 121-122, 128n, 137n and, also, John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan, 1973).

[7] Joan Crewdson, *Christian Doctrine in the light of Michael Polanyi's Theory of Personal Knowledge: a Personalist Theology* (Lampeter, Edwin Mellen Press, 1994).

[8] Adam Hood, *Baillie, Oman and Macmurray: Experience and Religious Belief* ((Ashgate Hants; Ashgate Publishing, 2003).

[9] Due to be published by Paternoster in 2012.

Primary Sources

A full bibliography is given at the end. Oman's main published works and the editions quoted in the thesis are listed below. In footnotes they are referred to by their primary titles: for example, *Vision and Authority*. The thesis has also drawn upon the Oman Archive in Westminster College Cambridge. It is a limited but important source. Oman gave instructions that his private papers should be destroyed after his death. Happily, Oman's Lecture Notes have survived and are a valuable supplement to his published writing. A second, primary source used has been the archive of the Presbytery of the United Presbyterian Church in Orkney. This has proved enlightening as to the ethos of Oman's home congregation, Victoria Street in Stromness. Presbytery records also reveal the concerns and priorities of the Seceder tradition in which Oman was spiritually nurtured and called to the Christian ministry.

Books by John Oman

Vision and Authority, or the Throne of St. Peter (Hodder & Stoughton, first edition 1902, new and revised edition 1928; eighth edition with introduction by T. W. Manson, 1948). Citations are from the 1928 edition.

The Problem of Faith and Freedom in the Last Two Centuries (London: Houghton, 1906).

The Church and the Divine Order (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1911).

The War and its Issues (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915).

Grace and Personality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, first edition 1917; second edition 1919; third edition 1925; reissued by Fontana Books, 1960, 1961; with introduction by John Hick, New York: Association Press, 1961; Japanese translation by Y. Kami, 1982). Citations are from the 1925 edition).

The Paradox of the World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921).

The Book of Revelation: Theory of Text: Rearrangement Text and Translation: Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923).

Revelation: A Revised Theory of Text (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928).

The Natural and the Supernatural (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931; reprinted 1950).

Concerning the Ministry (London: SCM, 1936; reprinted 1953; also published as a booklet, *The Office of Ministry*, SCM 1928; second edition 1929). Citations are from the 1936 edition.

Honest Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941).

A Dialogue with God (London: James Clarke & Co.1950; reprinted 1963).

Translation

Schleiermacher: *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1883)

Chapter One

Freedom in context: Church and religion in Scotland and Orkney in the late nineteenth century.

Introduction

This chapter looks at the early, formative, religious influences upon Oman in his native Orkney and in the ecclesiastical environment of the nineteenth century. Beginning with a survey of the mosaic that was the ecclesiastical landscape of Victorian Scotland, the chapter moves to the particularity of the United Presbyterian Church and the influence of its main theologian John Cairns. The chapter, also, examines the impact on Oman of the Free Church trial of William Robertson Smith. Further, the narrative will journey back to Oman's childhood in Orkney, where elemental features of his thinking are first detected. It was the characters and tales that filled his childhood that taught Oman the meaning of personality; not as an abstract concept but as a varied, living reality. It was in Orkney, too, that the numinous became real, even before he could give it a name.

Themes in outline

Section one will take a broad-brush look at the ecclesiastical history of Victorian Scotland. Thereafter, it will focus more particularly on the formation and distinctive characteristics of the United Presbyterian Church. It was a religious communion marked by considerable breadth of vision and respect for individual conscience, especially with regard to confessional subscription. Oman was born into a tradition that, of all the Presbyterian traditions in Scotland, most respected the rights of conscience and took steps to accommodate conscience in its confessional theology.

Sections two is devoted to the life and work of John Cairns, (1818-1892). Oman's estimation of Cairns as a scholar and saint is corroborated by the quality of his learning, the breadth of his churchmanship and the depth of his piety. The formation of the United Presbyterian Church was largely pioneered by Cairns; and he was of special significance in Oman's early spiritual formation. Oman was a student for the

ministry at the United Presbyterian Church Theological Hall from 1882 to 1885; at that time Cairns was Principal.[1] Stephen Bevans records Oman's remark in one of his unpublished papers, *Dr. Cairns by One of His Old Students*," that Principal Cairns was "the greatest man I ever met".[2] It can be argued that Oman was not only influenced by Cairns but carried forward his theology, moving from a modified, confessional Calvinism to a personal, theological realism.

Section three will look at the trial of William Robertson Smith. Although Smith belonged to the Free Church, his trial had a wide impact on the religious consciousness of Scotland. Oman ascribed his calling to study philosophy and theology to the questions the trial raised; it marked his awakening from intellectual and theological innocence.

Section four takes the discussion to Oman's roots in Orkney. The mature expression of Oman's theology at Cambridge in the 1930s belongs to a world far removed from rural, pre-industrial, nineteenth century Orkney. But still, Oman understood his spiritual pilgrimage, over diversity of time and place, as a narrative of continuity. He found in his tradition the freedom to grow and develop; and it was in Orkney he first experienced the numinous, the ground of his later theology of the holy. Also, from his informal writings, the reader catches a glimpse of the earthy humanity that surrounded Oman's upbringing. His spiritual anthropology was rooted in Orkney, in the sense of humanity in God and God in all things.

The final section will come to an overview of the native influences that gave impetus to Oman the creative theologian. The core values of Oman's work, the complementary nature of freedom and faith, the priority of experience over theory and the variety of human response to the divine, all sprang from seeds sown in his Scottish background.

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[1] The Theological Hall of the United Secession Church became the Theological College of the United Presbyterian Church after the union of the Relief Church and United Secession Church in 1847. New buildings were acquired in Castle Terrace, Edinburgh, and opened in 1880 at a cost of £50,000 raised by voluntary subscription. Alexander R. McEwen, *Life and Letters of John Cairns* (London; Hodder and Stoughton, 1896), 627.

[2] *Doctrine of God*, 121.

1 Ecclesiastical Landscape

If blue is emblematic of Presbyterianism, then it was the predominant colour of the ecclesiastical map of Victorian Scotland. From the Highlands to the Borders and across the industrialised Lowlands, three strands of Presbyterianism captured the spiritual loyalty of Scots: the Church of Scotland, the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church. Yet though these Presbyterian communities predominated, they co-existed with small though significant rivals. These latter survived the religious wars and magisterial Reformations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; they continued into the twentieth century, where they took up a valued place in the emerging ecumenical dialogue.[3] For example, the Episcopal Church of Scotland provided a distinct sacramental emphasis for Christians who wanted to be both Protestant and Catholic and who culturally stood in the traditions of Jacobean rather than Covenanter Scotland. The Roman Catholic community, from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, increased rapidly through immigration from Ireland; and there were other small, but significant, denominations or dissenting bodies: the Congregational, Old Independent and Baptist congregations with roots in the Reformation. In addition, there was the Methodist Church, the fruit of the itinerant preaching of George Whitefield and John Wesley. These smaller ecclesial communities were stronger in the eighteenth century than the nineteenth. They did not have large scale immigration to increase their numbers; and they tended to suffer as the result of the expansion of the United Presbyterian Church. However, these "traditional strands" of older non-conformity were to find a kindred spirit of a novel kind, in the populist evangelism Dwight L. Moody and Ira D. Sankey. The latter first visited Scotland in 1874. The fruits of this new evangelism, with its less doctrinally focused spirituality, were soon evidenced in the changing patterns of worship. Even in psalm singing Presbyterianism, in the face of heated debate, organs were installed and hymns became normative, changing not just the face of Presbyterian worship, but something in its core spirituality. Personal spiritual experience, whilst not

[3] The synopsis of denominational history in Scotland, given below, is informed by Callum G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

replacing doctrinal orthodoxy, came to have a more determinative place in personal and corporate life.

However, though minority bodies had a part to play, it was Presbyterianism – established, free or voluntary – that won the spiritual adherence of the majority of Scots; these varied expressions of Presbyterian of polity and practice are outlined below.

1.1 Established Church

Andrew L. Drummond and John Bulloch, in the second volume of their comprehensive study, *The Church in Late Victorian Scotland,*[4] remark that thirty years after the Disruption "the Church of Scotland had not merely survived but was gaining strength."[5] Despite the cataclysmic change of the Disruption, the Auld Kirk remained an important feature of the ecclesiastical landscape. This assessment, however, should not be over emphasised. Bulloch and Drummond have a decided sympathy towards the Establishment and the burden of their argument is that the Disruption forced the Church of Scotland into a "sectarian" environment. Thus, they portray the continuing strength of the Auld Kirk in a fractious ecclesiastical climate as a testament to spiritual strength, if not superiority.

> Her mind was more flexible, her contacts were wider and, while the leaders of the Free Church spoke only to their own membership, men like Norman McLeod, John Tulloch, and John Caird were national figures.[6]

Callum Brown offers an alternative, revisionist history. Whereas Drummond and Bulloch wrote from the perspective of the 1970s, with an enthusiasm that was theologically liberal and ecumenical, Brown writes with a sociological interest and a postmodern perspective. He does not treat the religious diversity of the period as pejoratively "sectarian". For example, his view of the events of 1843 is that they were essentially a movement of self-determination, by a large section of the Scottish

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[4] Andrew L. Drummond and James Bulloch, *The Church in Late Victorian Scotland*, *1843-1874* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1975); and *The Church in Late Victorian Scotland, 1874-1900* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1978).

[5] *Late Victorian Scotland*, 1.

[6] *Late Victorian Scotland*, 1.

population. Nor was the Disruption, in his view, "a single split";[7] much less was it the work of scheming clerics.

> The Disruption of 18th March 1843 was the most spectacular event in modern Scotland. …This event was to become symbolic of a great sacrifice of money and security, and the ultimate statement of social and religious self-determination…Nationally, few parts were untouched by the Disruption with even the northern island groups of Orkney and Shetland experiencing a walk out of 32% of the clergy.[8]

The Disruption, thus viewed, was the result of deep undercurrents in society that were both social and religious. Ecclesiastically, the tensions could not be resolved within existing structures; and so clergy and congregations found freedom in "the new wineskins" of the Free Church. It was the beginning and not the end of a process. The church history of the period that followed was a changing pattern of unions, failed unions, and protracted campaigning over the perennial issue of disestablishment. The freedom gained at the Disruption, when placed at the disposal of the Holy Spirit, led to sifting of hearts and minds in the search for unity in the body of Christ.

1.2 Free Church of Scotland (1843-1900)

Brown described the genesis of the Free Church in dramatic terms. The Disruption expressed the zeitgeist of Scottish religious culture in the middle of the century. Its effects reached far and wide, impinging on diverse social and economic communities.

> It created a large and influential denomination almost literally overnight amidst scenes of great excitement and public attention. All over Scotland, ministers left their manses and ministers and elders and congregations left their parish churches to meet the following Sunday in farmyards, graveyards, public halls, barns, gravel pits, caves, beaches, on hillsides and on board anchored ships.[9]

This great act of faith and sacrifice, as well as energy, was in a short time a settled part of Scottish religious culture. Kenneth Ross highlights the ease with which the

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[7] *Religion and Society*, 25.

[8] *Religion and Society*, 27.

[9] *Religion and Society*, 25.

Disruption moved from being a protest movement to being established institutionally.[10] The Sustentation Fund, the brainchild of Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847), provided income for the 583 ministers in the first year. But its eventual success was such that it was able to provide for 1200 ministers by the year 1900. At the same time an extensive building programme was undertaken, providing churches and manses: an initiative reflecting the support of broad sections of the business community and commercial interests. The physical presence of the Free Church was thus quickly established.

It was inevitable that a "free" Church, that came into being on a point of principle, namely freedom from patronage, should have the question of freedom ever at the heart of its life and witness. The question of personal freedom came to a head, and sad conclusion, with the trial of William Robertson Smith, beginning in 1877. We know from Oman's remarks in the preface to *Vision and Authority* that reverberations were felt far beyond the pews of Free Church members.[11] The trial marked a spiritual turning point in Oman's life. For Oman the issue was not only one of freedom, with respect to confessional loyalty and its relation to conscience; it raised deeper questions about the nature of religion itself. The controversy inspired Oman to shift the seat of authority in religion from the written word to the primary witness of God in experience. With Oman's mature reflection came a new paradigm for authority; the authority of the sacred and the holy, the voice of God spoken in and through the immediacy environment. The impact of the Robertson Smith case on Oman is discussed at length, below, in the section: trials and tribulations.

1.3 The United Presbyterian Church (1847-1900)

The United Presbyterian Church was formed on 13th May 1847 through the coming together of the United Secession Church and the Relief Church. Although a major element in the make up of Victorian Presbyterianism in Scotland, the United Presbyterian tradition has not received the breadth of historical study that has been

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[10] Kenneth Ross, " Free Church of Scotland," in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* General Editors: David F. Wright, David C. Lachman and Donald Meek (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 337-338.

[11] *Vision and Authority*, Preface to second edition, 9-10.

given to the Auld Kirk or to the Free Church. Brown finds the secession traditions the most interesting sociologically; and he attributes neglect of interest in them to the fact that dissenting stubbornness fits ill at ease with present day ecumenical sympathies.

> Unfortunately these are also the least studied of Scottish churches, largely because ecclesiastical historians have viewed them unsympathetically from a twentieth-century ecumenical standpoint as schismatics, fanatics and inward-looking sectarians who "thought little of the unity of the Church" and whose primary concern was to have their own way.[12]

Whilst misconceptions may account for lack of scholarly interest in seceding traditions of the eighteenth century, they do not explain the lack of historical study of seceding traditions in the nineteenth century, a period when increasingly they came together in successive ecclesiastical unions. The vision of a national Church never died; and the various unions amongst seceding factions, from 1820 onwards, were progressive steps towards its realisation. The seceding churches believed that their separation "was not from the Church of Scotland as such, but from those who had usurped power within it".[13] Separation had never been embarked upon lightly, and the ideal of a national Church was never jettisoned.

The complicated historical paths towards greater unity are difficult to summarize with clarity. The metaphor of a patchwork quilt comes to mind. A variety of Presbyterian factions, with strange titles rooted in a colourful past, were slowly integrated into a greater whole. The Auld Licht burghers were received into the Church of Scotland in 1839. Ross remarks that to them the Established Church of the 1830s was the "free, faithful and reforming" General Assembly to which the secession "fathers" had appealed.[14] However, they were in the main to depart again with the Disruption in 1843! The Reformed Presbyterian Church, the successor to the Covenanters of the seventeenth century, entered communion with the Free Church in 1876, on the condition that they held their own position with respect to the

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[12] *Religion and Society*, 22.

[13] *Dictionary,* 835.

[14] *Dictionary*, 836.

Covenants. In the event, one minister and twelve congregations remained apart.[15] However, the first union of the century was the most significant. The creation of the United Secession Church in 1820 brought together the "new light" burghers and the "new light" antiburghers; both represented the more theologically liberal wings of the original Secession. It came about partly because of changing circumstances. In a new century the divisive issue of the Burgess Oath did not stir the same dogmatic passions; and difference of conviction was embraced in a spirit of tolerance. A charitable spirit informed the Basis of Union. The second article both canonised the traditional Seceder objections to interference by the civil magistrate and disavowed all persecuting attitudes.

> …we do not approve or require an approbation of any thing in these books (the Subordinate Standards) which teaches, or may be thought to teach, compulsory or persecuting and intolerant principles of religion.[16]

The United Secession Church accordingly valued spiritual freedom with respect to confessional subscription. Ian Hamilton, in his study of the Seceders' relationship to the Westminster of Confession of Faith, notes a change in the language of subscription. Hitherto ministers had been required to subscribe to the doctrine of the Confession in its entirety, except for the chapter on the civil magistrate. In the new Basis of Union, ministers were required to affirm only that the subordinate standards were "expressive of the sense" of Scripture. He quotes the relevant question from the new Formula of Ordination of Ministers.

> Do you acknowledge the Westminster Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter catechisms, as the confession of your faith, expressive of the sense in which you understand the Scriptures…?[17]

Not all were happy with the newly expressed freedom. A small number of Conservative Antiburghers separated in 1827 to form the Associate Synod of Protestors. Eventually they found a home with the Old Light Antiburghers. But still, despite these splinters, the inexorable movement was towards greater unity and

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[15] *Dictionary*,835.

[16] Ian Hamilton, *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy: Seceders and Subscription in Scottish Presbyterianism* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House,1990), 17.

[17] *Orthodoxy*, 16.

greater freedom. The United Secession Church, in moving away from the Covenants, in adopting a voluntary position on Church-State relations and in granting more freedom with regard to subscription, prepared the way for union with the Relief Church.

The Relief Church had come into being in 1761. Like the other seceding traditions, it was born of dispute over patronage in the Established Church. Nicholas Needham, in his article in the *Scottish Dictionary of Church History and Theology*, highlights the salient characteristics of the denomination. These included the repudiation of the National Covenant (1638) and the Solemn League and Covenant (1643), the principle of open Communion, the practice of sharing pulpits with ministers of other denominations (though not with Arminians) and an emphasis on Church Courts as occasions for fellowship and consultation, rather than on their legislative function. The Relief Church placed emphasis on evangelism and was the first Church in Scotland to officially adopt a strategy for foreign missions. The Synod passed a resolution of 1796 calling on support for the missionary enterprise and encouraging

> all the members of this Synod (to) unite in their exertions with any society that may be formed to promote such a good and great design.[18]

The members of the Relief Church were also strong in their campaign against the slave trade. They were also pioneers in the use of hymnody. The union of the "Relief" and the "United Secession" created The United Presbyterian Church, a denomination with 518 congregations.

This summary of the component parts of the United Presbyterian Church helps put into perspective its particular ethos. Like the Relief Church, the United Presbyterians disapproved of "persecuting and intolerant principles in religion" and, from the Relief, the new body adopted the practice of free Communion. The new denomination was also committed to the voluntarist principle, something that hindered and frustrated dialogue with the Free Church. The United Presbyterian Church, however, had its internal disputes over the introduction instrumental music in worship, particularly organs. But this dispute resolved itself when, in 1872,

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[18] "Relief Church", 703.

official sanction was given to the use of instrumental music in worship. Finally, with regard to the theological liberalism of the United Presbyterian Church, it is enlightening to return to Ian Hamilton's study of subscription. He points out that the Formula of Subscription for the Basis of Union of 1847 marked a shift towards the United Secession formula of 1820 and away from the Relief Church traditional form of subscription. The Relief Church had asked ministers to subscribe to the "whole Confession" as a "Confession of their faith."[19] Indeed, in 1789 one of the Relief Church's ministers, the Rev'd James Smith of Dunfermline, was disciplined for the proposal that subscription to the Confession should have the appendage, "in so far as it agrees with the Word of God."[20] However, the strictness of the Relief Church gave way to the latitudinous phraseology already noted as being in use in the United Secession Church from 1820. In 1847 licentiates and ministers in the newly formed United Presbyterian Church were not required to personally identify with the subordinate standards. In other words, they did not have to acknowledge the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms as being a confession of "their faith." The question became:

> Do you acknowledge the Westminster confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms as an exhibition of the sense in which you understand Holy Scriptures?[21]

Hamilton's thesis is that this subscription was a further diminution of Calvinist orthodoxy. Certainly, these changes signalled a freer relation to it.

Summary

This section has examined the ecclesiastical mosaic that was nineteenth century Scotland. There were minority churches such as the Episcopalian, the Roman Catholic and varied dissenting bodies. However, Presbyterianism in its threefold form dominated. The established Church of Scotland remained the largest communion, followed by the Free Church and the United Presbyterian. The later part

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[19] *Orthodoxy*, 23.

[20] *Orthodoxy*, 20.

[21] *Orthodoxy*, 23.

of the nineteenth century was marked by movements towards re-union. With re-union came accommodation and a shedding of principles that hitherto led to schism. Thus, the Church of Scotland gave up its patronage, the Free Church gave up its residual belief in establishment and the United Presbyterian Church, in final reunion in 1929, accepted a Church by law established. The question of individual conscience was always near to the surface and the United Secession Church and the United Presbyterian Churches led the way in adopting greater freedom with regard to confessional subscription.

If one considers Oman's emphasis on personal freedom in the light of the foregoing, it is not too much to say that he mirrored the agenda and debate that exercised the hearts and minds of many Presbyterians in Victorian Scotland. United Presbyterians struggled to reconcile the liberty wherewith Christ has made the believer free with the concept of confessional subscription imposed on ministers and elders. Paradoxically, the Westminster Confession of Faith itself says that implicit faith is injurious to conscience.[22] However, thought-through, personal faith comes with a price tag; the cost being that of diversity of personal conviction and ever changing perceptions of truth itself. Oman's theology was willing to face the cost. If faith is truly personal then it must be an expression of the most cherished aspect of personality, i.e. freedom. Confessional theology in Oman's work was replaced by a theology of personal reality, personally appropriated. Confessional theology remained as a witness to the spiritual journey travelled and, thereby, valuable as a vantage point from which to behold the distant vistas; but, the maps of theological minds of another age could not, for Oman, be determinative of the way still to be travelled. Only the radical call to personal freedom and faithful reliance upon God can navigate unchartered waters of the Kingdom of God.

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[22] John Macpherson, edited, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1882), 122-123. Chapter XX, Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience: "the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy the liberty of conscience, and reason also". Oman took this caveat to its logical conclusion, setting freedom above all historical expressions of faith, no matter how sacred.

2 John Cairns (1818-1892)

The cautious, but real, theological liberalism of the United Presbyterian Church provides a suitable point of departure for the consideration of its main theologian. John Cairns was, by all reports, a big man in stature. He was born on 23rd August 1818, the son of a shepherd from Berwickshire. He himself worked as a herd until the day before he went to Edinburgh University. He was one of eight of a family who, like many other families of farm labourers, lived a migratory life within the confines of the Borders. The Cairns family moved six times in eleven years before settling at Dunglass Estate, in the Parish of Cockburnspath. The family Church was Stockbridge United Secession Church (Burgher), and the father was an elder from 1831 until his death.[23] John attended the local school at Cockburnspath. He was taught by a Mr. McGregor, a native of Perthshire and a graduate of St. Andrews who had been student for the Church of Scotland, but decided instead on teaching as a profession. Ordinarily school fees ranged from "three to five shillings a quarter;"[24] and for no extra charge Mr. McGregor proposed that John join the Latin class that was being formed. This proposal caused Cairns' father great agony of conscience over whether acceptance of this offer would set one of his sons above the rest. His mother, however, had no misgivings and the minister, Mr. Inglis, was also in strong support of the proposal. Within two years John was also in the Greek class! This gift for the study of language was to be a feature of Cairns' academic career. In 1884, at the age of sixty-six, he acquired Dano-Norwegian in order to participate in the Evangelical Alliance Conference in Copenhagen. Around this time, too, he taught himself Dutch, so that he could read the works of Kuenen and follow the developments surrounding the secession of the evangelical party from the state Church in Holland. He began his day by reading the Bible in Hebrew and Greek; and to this in 1883 he added Arabic, so that he could lecture in "Mohammedanism".

> Two years ago I took a fancy to learn Arabic, having to lecture in Mohammedanism….I believe that Christianity is going to recover its lost ground from this old enemy, not it may be very speedily, but in

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[23] John Cairns, *Principal Cairns* (Edinburgh: Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier,1903), 29-31.

[24] *Principal Cairns*, 22.

> time, and I wish to pray in Arabic for its arrival. When I read through the Koran I shall know the originals of all my Apologetics lectures. I shall have some revenge over Gibbon, who drew so triumphantly the career of the Saracens and yet professed that he did not know a word of the language; and if I cannot go to Palestine or Egypt, I shall be able to imagine the sound of Wady This or Tel That.[25]

This aptitude for academic work was coupled with an equal interest in humanity. In his *wanderjahr* Cairns travelled on foot quite penniless throughout Germany, France, Switzerland, and over the Alps to Italy. While as a minister in Berwick, he travelled to Ireland in 1864 and climbed Croagh Patrick with pilgrims. He was impressed with the view from the Mayo mountains of Clew Bay, but was unimpressed at the pilgrims "walking on their bare knees" and in conversation he "tried to state the way of salvation through faith in Christ."[26] In 1880, in order that he "might speak of it from observation",[27]he attended Mormon worship in Salt Lake City where Orson Pratt, the last survivor of the Saints founding fathers, gave the address. And although Cairns did not find the experience uplifting, he concluded that the Mormons, "if they have improved the earth as they have visibly done", are "another case of God's choosing the most unlikely instruments for His plans".[28]It is a remarkably, tolerant, indeed charitable, remark. Furthermore, Cairns' reverence for the ways of providence carried through to his teaching methods, being always careful not to impose his views on students. His biographer writes:

> One student, who at that date, was floundering at the university in the marshes that encircle Hegelianism, recollects how in the misery of mental confusion he was referred to Dr Cairns for guidance. Dr Cairns asked him to write out a detailed statement of the points that perplexed him, and having read the statement, merely told him to "go on and think things out for himself without fear".[29]

It was counsel predicated on the inviolability of personality and realism in epistemology: Cairns believed that God is his own best witness and will never

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[25] Alexander R. MacEwen, *Life and Letters of John Cairns* (London: Hodder & Stoughton,1896), 726.

[26] *Life and Letters*, 490.

[27] *Life and Letters*, 692.

[28] *Life and Letters*, 692.

[29] *Life and Letters*, 557.

deceive the seeking heart. This personal realism would, in time, come to be equally cherished by Oman.

In theology, Cairns was a moderate Calvinist. He raised the question of a Declaratory Act for the United Presbyterian Church so that subscription to confessional standards would not be hurtful to the conscience of ministers and elders. Not only was he instrumental in shaping the Declaratory Act of 1878, his powers of persuasion ensured it was passed unanimously by the General Assembly. This was no mean feat at a time of heresy trials and it gave to posterity a marker that is still relevant. His travels, his learning, his unending thirst for knowledge were combined with a warm piety. The Secession and United Presbyterian traditions were obviously amenable to the enlightened Calvinism that Cairns espoused. Unlike Rainy, he was not drawn into the turbulent waters of ecclesiastical politics; and he had the gift of plain speech in both his writing and speaking. To appreciate the stature of Cairns, one needs to look more closely at his spirituality.

From Cairns' letters, some published sermons and other literary fragments we have a glimpse of someone for whom piety was more essential than knowledge, and charity more important than doctrine. It was his piety and charity that enabled him to reach beyond the boundaries of his Calvinist creed and rejoice in what he referred to as "the faith of the universal Church".[30] Speaking of Methodists, he says:

> Far be it from me to speak one unkind word of brethren I love so much, and who have helped make our common Christianity what it is today throughout the earth.[31]

In the same spirit, Cairns had a good relationship with the Church of England vicar and people in Berwick on Tweed. The Vicar of the Parish from 1866 to 1880, Reverend J. G. Rowe M.A., gives a fulsome picture of Cairns.

> When I came to Berwick, Dr. Cairns was the first and, I think the only Nonconformist minister who called on me. I was struck at once with his large, well built frame, fine, open, countenance, bright brilliant eyes and expressive, masculine mouth. His manner was manly and heartily

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[30] *Principal Cairns*, 75.

[31] *Life and Letters*, 668.

> cordial, not gushing nor obtrusive, but that of a man who meant what he said and was prepared to respect your opinions…[32]

Significantly, Rowe recalls the sense of being fellow workers that they shared, and an awareness of a catholicity of faith that was the bond between them. He continues:

> I remember how he wished health and prosperity on me and mine, and a blessing upon the work I came to do. He told me how he admired the liturgy of the Church of England, and how he could fully subscribe to her articles. His issue with us concerned solely Church government.[33]

Nor was Cairns' gesture merely words, as evidenced by his attendance at the weekly lectures in the Episcopalian Church hall.

> That he really meant this was witnessed by his not infrequent attendance at the Thursday morning lecture in the parish church, prompted, I think, by that simple humility which led him to make one of the "two or three" then gathered together…Better, holier, more happy neighbours none could have than he and his sister.[34]

These quotations correct the image of Cairns as man of fanatical zeal.[35] And they paint a portrait of a man secure in himself. One would imagine his presence at the Episcopalian morning lecture may have raised an occasional eyebrow! Yet his thirty years as minister in Berwick was marked by no discord or dispute.

One detects a spirituality that was the source of magnanimity and a catholicity of spirit. Cairns' piety was not a restricting facet of his life, but a liberating one. As virtual leader in the United Presbyterian Church, it is plain that Cairns had the spiritual vision and determination to transcend both Calvinism as a system of doctrine, and Presbyterianism as an exclusive ecclesiology. Under his guidance, Article 7 of the Declaratory Articles of 1878 granted "liberty of opinion …on such matters not entering into the substance of the faith;" in effect, it affirmed the priority of the personal over the confessional. In Cairns' words, the aim was "to grant liberty here and there as was not formally allowed, although generally believed to be acted

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[32] *Life and Letters*, 460.

[33] *Life and Letters*, 460.

[34] *Life and Letters*, 460.

[35] George Elder Davie, *The Democratic Intellect* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1961), 311.

upon…"[36] This personal latitude can either be portrayed negatively, as by Ian Hamilton – namely, an erosion of Calvinist orthodoxy – or it can be valued positively as an alleviation of the spiritual stress caused by orthodoxy. For Cairns it was not erosion, but the granting of freedom to mind and conscience. His latitudinous mind sought the maximum freedom possible within the Westminster doctrinal tradition. It was a limited freedom, but still it was in its day a triumph for conscience. It formed a precedent that was to find replication in the Free Church Declaratory Act of 1893 and become an enduring facet of Presbyterianism in Scotland.

Evaluation of Cairns would be incomplete without consideration of his involvement in the "Ferrier Affair". Though of catholicity of spirit in churchmanship and latitudinous in his Calvinism, in philosophy Cairns was suspicious of pantheism and Hegelianism. Therefore, not as a detached observer but as a very interested party, Cairns was enlisted to advise Edinburgh Council with regard to the appointment to fill Sir William Hamilton's chair in 1856. A pamphlet war ensued between Cairns and Ferrier, with Cairns accusing Ferrier of flirting with dangerous German ideas and betraying Scottish philosophy. The controversy has evoked various responses from succeeding generations of philosophers. For example, George Davie writing in the 1960s regards Cairns as the villain of the sad episode; describing him as,

> (an) evangelical fanatic, but full of levelling rancour, accommodating within certain limits to the march of social improvement.[37]

Elizabeth Sanderson Haldane, philosopher and biographer of Ferrier, gives a more dispassionate view. Writing some forty years after the event, she reflects on how attitudes to the whole question of truth and how it is pursued had changed: changed in the direction of tolerance, though with corresponding loss of passion.

> The greater toleration of the present day may mean corresponding lack of zeal or interest, but it surely also means recognition of the fact that men may choose their own methods in the search for truth without thereby endangering the object held in view. Mr Cairns' attack without

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[36] *Life and Letters*, 674.

[37] George Elder Davie, *The Democratic Intellect* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1961), 311.

> intention – for he was an honourable man and an able scholar –was unjust.[38]

The irony was that Ferrier was not espousing atheism. Indeed, as Richard Burdon Haldane points out in the forward to his sister's biography of Ferrier, Ferrier's work became important in Christian apologetics by the end of the century.

> The opinions which in 1856 were regarded by the authorities of the Free and United Presbyterian Churches as disqualifying Ferrier of the opportunity for influencing the mind of the youth of Edinburgh, ….are regarded by the present generation of Presbyterians as the main reliable bulwark against the attacks of unbelievers. If one may judge by the recent volume called *Lux Mundi,* the same phenomenon displays itself among the young High Church party in England. The Time–Spirit is fond of revenges.[39]

One of Cairns' criticisms of Ferrier's philosophy[40] had been, "that it remakes Absolute Existence into mere relation and leaves everything in the realm of Being" [41] To later Scottish theologians, the thought of God being known "in relation" was a gain. The next generation of philosophers would take up the idea of relation as fundamental to ontology under the label of personal idealism.

2.1 Oman and Cairns: warmth of appreciation

Oman held Cairns in the highest regard. In the short unpublished paper[42] quoted by Bevans, Oman veers towards hagiography, painting a picture of his College Principal in the most revered terms. Cairns was "the greatest man I ever met", Oman commented; and, "it was personality that impressed us not his work".[43] Cairns' life called for a biography to be written, but "he himself was too modest to care what

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[38] E. S. Haldane, *James Frederick Ferrier* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, 1899), 75.

[39] *James Frederick Ferrier*, 9.

[40] J. F. Ferrier, *Scottish Philosophy: The Old and the New, a statement by Prof. Ferrier* (Edinburgh: Sutherland & Knox, 1856).

[41] John Cairns, in *Pamphlets Philosophical* Special Collections, New College, Edinburgh University A.a/3.56.

[42] WT/1/ XIII "Dr Cairns – by one of his students" in the Oman Archive in Westminster College, Cambridge.

[43] "Dr Cairns".

meaning the world had of him".[44] Interestingly, though Cairns was a gifted linguist, Oman felt that his mother tongue, Scots, gave most freedom to his thought, whereas English cramped his expression.

> Every Scotsman growing up amongst ordinary people has to learn English as a foreign tongue. English never did justice to his [Cairns'] freely moving mind as his Scotch (sic) did.[45]

Recalling Cairns' lectures, Oman tells how Cairns could quote from the "Hebrew Bible by the page"; of how there appeared "something of divine radiance when he talked of great subjects" and "of all things about him his laugh was the most wonderful".[46] Allied to Cairns' engaging lectures was the spiritual quality of his life noted above. Oman comments;

> Of nothing did he make more conscience than the students' prayer meeting. During the last moments of his life it is said he imagined taking part in it. [Break] When asked to preside he replied, "You first, I'll follow" No words more completely sum up his life.[47]

"Warm appreciation" might be too reserved an estimate of how Oman valued Cairns: as a man, as a Christian and as a thinker. Cairns appeared to Oman as a personality in whom humanity and piety blended without one corrupting the other. "His boyish tastes never left him as when eating green gooseberries and skimming stones on water": that simplicity was integral to a gravitas that touched his students deeply. Oman sums up Cairns' impact as he describes the end of term departures to service in various parts of the world.

> ….always partings, which we know will be forever, and the prayers had an inspiration in them. And when Cairns rose we felt a higher spirit among us, there was felicity of expression, strong feeling, sympathy and all that we look for in one that leads prayer [Break] but there was something else, something of a man who in ordinary life is in the infinite and not the finite. And there in a word was his true greatness.

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[44] "Dr Cairns".

[45] "Dr Cairns".

[46] "*Dr Cairns*".

[47] "*Dr Cairns*".

> He ever felt the infinite around him and lay perpetually like a child in its bosom.[48]

And so, the paper continues in an elegiac tone. It reveals a lot about Oman as well as his mentor. Oman, too, lived with a sense of the divine in the midst of the ordinary. *The Natural and the Supernatural* may be considered a philosophical analysis of the spiritual sensibility that Oman recognised so clearly in Cairns and which was native to his own soul. One gets a feeling that the boldness of Oman's theological position, namely that of setting personal experience of God above external authorities, may not have developed so quickly without first hand experience of the personal piety of Cairns. Oman found in Cairns a personal sense of God that was a near relation of his own and for Oman, like Cairns, piety and intellect are integrated in faith, with piety in the lead.

With regard to academic theology, Cairns' main published work beyond a wealth of pamphlet literature, are his Cunningham Lectures of 1880. He was the first theologian from outside the Free Church to be invited to give the lectures; lectures instituted by the Free Church in memory one of her foremost theologians.[49] In the lectures, Cairns took up the theme of *Unbelief in the Eighteenth Century*: *As contrasted with its earlier and later history*.[50] He displays great erudition and the lectures show Cairns' encyclopaedic knowledge with regard to patristic sources, as well as to German and French theology. His conclusions with regard to unbelief are summarized as follows.

First, there is no continuity in unbelief. "Almost nothing has been in common but the rejection of the supernatural. Deism, pantheism, scepticism and atheism, have all appeared in turns. If there has been progress, it has been from negation to negation more extreme;"[51] Cairns continues:

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[48] "*Dr Cairns*".

[49] William Cunningham, 1805-1861 Principal and Professor of Theology and Church History at New College Edinburgh.(1847-1861).

[50] John Cairns, *Unbelief in the Eighteenth Century: As contrasted with its earlier and later history* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1881).

[51] *Unbelief*, 277.

> The assailants of Christianity have reversed each other's procedure, making each other's denials their premises….A whole generation, a whole century, disowns the spirit of its precursor, which, however, returns, if not in the mass, in solitary instances. Hence the oblivion into which so much of this literature has passed.[52]

This point highlights the importance of what Oman calls "spiritual ancestry" in Judeo-Christian faith in comparison with the repudiation of tradition in its critics: "the higher our own endeavour, the more we shall know its dependence upon the good and faithful".[53] In other words, the prophetic spirit in Christianity is a constructive criticism, a purifying of tradition as well as new apprehension of reality. Oman was at one with Cairns that theological thinking never begins with a *tabula rasa* but is contextualised; and both thinkers exhibit appreciation of the depth and width of tradition, though Oman took freedom in relation to tradition further than his teacher.

Secondly, in Cairns' view, Christianity has advanced in spite of all adverse argument.

> It was a great saying of Origen, in opening his reply to Celsus, that Paul in speaking of separation from Christ, did not mention arguments among its causes.[54]

Argument, for Cairns, can neither create nor destroy. "The reasonings (sic) of unbelievers", he writes, "have not hindered, on a large scale the progress of Christianity".[55] One wonders, however, if Cairns was alert to the depth of alienation from Christianity in Victorian society. The advance of evolutionary views, higher criticism and pantheism had an accumulative effect that dissipated the faith of many Victorians. But, Cairns would not credit reason with such seductive power over the spiritual; and neither would he concede that rationalism is effectual as an instrument of spiritual renewal. He continues:

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[52] *Unbelief*, 278.

[53] *Vision and Authority*, 90.

[54] *Unbelief*, 278.

[55] *Unbelie*f, 278.

> "Christianity has not been saved to us in Britain mainly by the arguments of Butler and Sherlock; but by the slow yet sure revival that began to spread over the English speaking world; nor was Germany rescued from rationalism, in so far as it has been, merely by professors and theologians meeting negative criticism, but by the return of visible Christianity, and by the calling forth of prayer which has power with God.[56]

Oman, unlike Cairns, does not underestimate the power of sceptical voices and he did not have Cairns' confidence that Christianity, as presently constituted, could hold back the tides of secularism. For example, in *The Natural and the Supernatural*, Oman devotes considerable space to countering theories that religion is illusion;[57] that said, Oman did not believe that rational argument alone could rescue faith. In the same volume, he wrote: "the basis of religion, whatever it may be, is not rational argument".[58] The primary thing for Oman, as with Cairns, is the encounter of God with the whole person, through feeling, conscience and intellect. Encounter with the divine puts the whole person, not merely intellect, to the test. In that respect, the essence of religion is more like art or poetry than rational discourse. Oman sums up the point as follows:

> Because religion is often studied by persons better equipped intellectually than religiously, this danger of introducing intellectual interest illegitimately is always with us. It is a danger of the same kind as criticism is for poetry, when it proceeds as if criticism were poetry.[59]

Thirdly, following on from the foregoing criticism of a purely rational apologetic, Cairns considered that the only true defence against unbelief is the reassertion of the supernatural character of Christianity. "It is eminently so in connection with the Methodist revival in England;"[60] and, renewed appreciation did not stop there.

> the very experience of Romanism and Tractarianism has been in the same direction; for it has not been merely for their hierarchical or ritualistic side that has given them strength against unbelief, but their meeting so far those wants of the soul which are rooted in the relation

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[56] *Unbelief*, 279.

[57] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 29-46.

[58] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 26.

[59] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 6-7.

[60] *Unbelief*, 279

> of man to the supernatural, and which only the supernatural can supply.[61]

Oman, similarly, emphasised supernatural reality underneath otherwise diverse ecclesiastical renewal. He regarded the Confessional movement in Germany and the High Church movement in England as a "revival of practical religion" that can not be merely ascribed to "intellectual constructions of Christianity".[62] And, like Cairns, the great thrust of Oman's work was to see reality in its wholeness; theology, he believed, should not "isolate and divide what should be one in itself and the source of all unity".[63] Again, in this emphasis, Oman shared the conviction of his teacher. Cairns wrote:

> Wherever we can, by fair and legitimate interpretation, harmonise scripture with history, with philosophy, with science, we are not only warranted but bound to do so, since all truth is one, and God requires us to display it unbroken.[64]

En route to his three conclusions with respect to unbelief, Cairns has much to say about the reality of God. If the reader sets Cairns's views along side those of Oman written in the ensuing century, the lines of continuity are clear. The central premise of both theologies is that God is more than a principle of reason. Cairns' Cunningham Lectures reveal a theology which integrates intellect, conscience and heart and which is expressive of the wholeness of personality and reality. Cairns valued reason as an aid to experience, but it could not be a substitute for it. Oman, from that same starting point, developed a relational theology which was to place personality at the centre of Christian experience of God. The impact of the large and generous figure of John Cairns must surely have played a part in setting Oman's thoughts in motion.

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[61] *Unbelief*, 279.

[62] *Faith and Freedom,* 344.

[63] *Honest Religion*, 155.

[64] *Unbelief*, 281.

Summary

This section has brought into focus the stature and significance of John Cairns, the foremost theologian of the United Secession and United Presbyterian Churches. Cairns may be described as a catalyst in the change that was taking place in Scottish Presbyterianism. The process of liberalisation was greatest in the United Presbyterian denomination. Whether the process is called the erosion of Calvinism or the birth of evangelical catholicity, Cairns was at the centre of the transformation. He is a representative of the Scottish tradition of humble rural roots coupled with broad education. Cairns spoke from deep within tradition and brought light to it from without, from the whole European tradition of philosophy and theology. The piety of his childhood ran concurrently with his breadth of learning and he influenced the tide of events with his personality as much as his arguments.

Oman's adulation is particularly striking because it was characteristic of him not to put his "confidence in princes"[65], intellectual or otherwise. Obviously, Oman found in Cairns a spiritual mentor who inspired him not to emulate but to grow and develop. Oman's theology builds upon the person-centred focus of Cairns, stretching far beyond anything imagined by his mentor, yet in continuity with it. Cairns' biographer comments that Cairns' methodology was to:

> ….build up, out of the data of biblical interpretation, counterchecked but not over ruled by Christian consciousness, a system which may harmonise with the philosophic spirit of the present day.[66]

One vital difference is to be noted in Oman. In the interests of Christian freedom, it is Christian consciousness that takes priority over biblical data. Oman's relationship with Cairns did not result in imitation but in appreciation and warmth of respect that did not inhibit independence of mind. That this should have been so, is a tribute to master and pupil alike.

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[65] Psalm 118: 9

[66] *Life and Letters*, 334.

3 Trials and Tribulations

This section looks at the ecclesiastical trial of William Robertson Smith. It begins with inquiry into Smith's background and his academic genius. Oman ascribed his conviction with regard to the importance of personal freedom to the impact of the Smith case. However, it was not the only "heresy" trial and the question arises as to why the Smith case should have been so singular in its influence upon Oman.

3.1 William Robertson Smith (1846-1894)

William Robertson Smith was born in the Free Church Manse in the Parish of Keig and Tough, near Alford in Aberdeenshire. His education prior to his matriculation at Aberdeen University was entirely at home. Both his parents were enthusiastic teachers. His father, William Pirie Smith, was of humble origin and was an apprentice wood turner before preparing for the Free Church ministry. His first call, and subsequent ministry, was to the newly created Parish of Keig and Tough. Smith's mother, Jane née Robertson was daughter of Peter Robertson, a previous Rector of the University, and niece of Aberdeen artist George Giles.[67] There were nine children in the family: two died in infancy and only five lived into adult years. William and his younger brother George were delicate in health but, nevertheless, won bursaries to Aberdeen in 1861; William was not quite fifteen, and George only thirteen years eight months. William went on to win the prestigious Ferguson Scholarship in Mathematics, in open competition with candidates from the then four Scottish universities. Smith's mathematics Professor encouraged him to go directly to Cambridge, "where all the most promising young Aberdonians habitually went."[68] However, Smith's mind was set on the Free Church ministry; and so he went to New College for the four year Divinity course. During this student time, his mathematical abilities were employed as assistant to Peter Guthrie Tait, Professor of Natural Science at Edinburgh University. He was also tutor in Hebrew in his final year and he studied in Germany during the summer semester. At this early stage in his life he

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[67] William Johnstone, edited, *William Robertson Smith: Essays in Reassessment, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 189 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 18.

[68] *Reassessmen*t, 18.

made "effective personal contact"[69] with leading continental scholars; and, when the Chair of Hebrew and Oriental Languages became vacant at the Free Church College in Aberdeen, he was appointed to that post. The year was 1870; he was twenty-four years of age.

A brilliant academic career, however, was soon to be blown onto the rocks of theological controversy. It is generally recognised that the controversy that followed Smith's publication of articles in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1875 was fanned by a scathing review in the *Edinburgh Courant* of April 1876. The Review by John Tulloch ((1823-1886), Established Church minister and Principal of St. Mary's College St. Andrews, was at the time considered by some as an attempt to destabilise the Free Church. William Johnstone quotes Smith's father, William Pirie Smith, on this point. Writing in his memoir he says:

> It has been asserted- and the assertion has never been called into question – that that(sic) Review was dictated by Ecclesiastical jealousy – and Principal Tulloch has admitted as much, or at any rate that the writing of it was a natural act of revenge for the opposition offered by the Free Church to some doctrines propounded by Dr. N. McLeod.[70]

Of course, the articles Smith wrote were challenging in any event for the Free Church. For example, one of the central issues was the authorship of Deuteronomy. Was Deuteronomy a farewell address to the children of Israel? before Moses death and before Israel's entry to the promised land? Or was the Book of Deuteronomy, as Smith argued in company with continental scholarship, a legislative programme from a later time? Did it in fact reflect, not the teaching of Moses, but that of the Hebrew prophets from the eighth and seventh centuries? Does it come from the reforms of the reign of King Josiah? Sadly, the Free Church could not contain the polarities between these questions and the traditional view of the Bible as the Holy Scripture. After a protracted trial lasting from 1877 to 1881, Robertson Smith was dismissed from his Professorial Chair. The posts he subsequently held included that of Editor in Chief of *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* Reader in Arabic in Cambridge from 1883, head of Cambridge University library from 1887 and Sir Thomas Adams Professor of

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[69] *Reassessment,* 19.

[70] *Reassessment,* 19.

Arabic at Cambridge from 1889. He died from spinal tuberculosis in 1894; his brother Herbert had died of the same illness in 1887. His body was taken by train to Keig, and after a simple ceremony, attended by many friends he was buried in the Parish graveyard. The simple inscription reads:

> In memory of William Robertson Smith
>
> Professor of Arabic in the University of Cambridge
>
> Born 8th November 1846
>
> Died 31st March 1894
>
> Ps xxv: xiv The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him.

If, as the early Church said, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church; by analogy one can say that the tragedy of Robertson Smith was a seed as well. The Smith case was the "big case" that marked the end of an era. From early in the next century, theology and biblical studies would be no longer hostage to confessional constraints. Robertson Smith came at near the end of the tradition of Church based theology; and his tragedy was herald of a time when secularisation would ironically be the guardian of religious freedom. Perhaps Smith's gravestone in Keig, without any reference to his time as Professor in the Free Church College, was a sign of the road that all academic study of theology was to take in the twentieth century.

With regard to an assessment of Smith himself, he may best be called a conservative radical. For example, he had no equivocation about subscribing to the Westminster Confession of Faith. He refused the overture of Principal Tulloch to entice him into the broad Church movement of the Established Church.[71] And, like his Old Testament Professor at New College, A.B. Davidson, Smith regarded himself as a "believing critic." Alec Cheyne comments:

> Like Davidson before him, Smith must be ranked among the *believing* critics. That is certainly how he regarded himself….An early draft of his notorious Encyclopaedia Britannica contained a frank avowal that his account of his biblical writings proceeded, not from rationalistic presumptions, but from what he called " a recognition of the unique

[71] Alex. C. Cheyne, "Bible and Confession in Scotland: The Background to the William Robertson Smith Case", in *Reassessment*, 38.

> religious value of the Bible as the record of a unique and supernatural Revelation".[72]

This point finds elaboration in Smith's *Answer to the Form of Libel.* There, he makes what Cheyne calls a "striking remark." It is an insight into how Smith integrated his radical academic mind and the traditional faith he was proud to acknowledge as his own.

> If I am asked why I receive the Scripture as the Word of God and the only perfect rule of faith and life, I answer with all the fathers of the Protestant Church, because the Bible is the only record of the redeeming love of God, because in the Bible alone I find God to be drawing near to men in Christ Jesus and declaring to us in him His will for our salvation.[73]

It is, indeed, a revealing remark. It takes us to the roots of Smith's personal faith, roots again prophetic of the twentieth century. Smith affirms the Scripture as the Word of God because of its subject matter, namely, the revelation of God in Christ. It is a position that has echoes of the neo-orthodox reconciliation of the transcendent reference of the Scriptures with the necessary study of the Scriptures in their historical context.[74]

3.2 The Robertson Smith trial: a call and commission to Oman

The trial of Robertson Smith had many ramifications for the Church of his day and subsequently. Robertson Smith and his trial have been described in some detail because of its lasting impact on Oman as a young student in Edinburgh fresh from Orkney in 1877. Its effect is well documented in Oman's work and in secondary

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[72] *Reassessment,* 39.

[73] *Reassessment*, 39.

[74] For further evaluation of Robertson Smith see the other contributions in *Essays in Reassessment*; also, a critical article by David N Livingstone "Public spectacle and scientific theory: William Robertson Smith and the reading of evolution in Victorian Scotland" in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 35 (2004) 1-29. Livingstone links Robertson Smith's perspective on the history of Israel to the influence of evolutionary theory. For a contrary view see Douglas Davies in *Reassessment*, 311-319. The weakness of Livingstone's article is his personalising of the issues and emotional tone, characterising Robertson Smith as a villain in disguise. Far from being the product of a hidden liaison with evolution, as Livingstone implies, Robertson Smith's work represented a fearless integrity in the sphere of biblical scholarship.

literature.[75] Oman had gone to Edinburgh with the ambition to study medicine;[76] his knowledge of theology was not sophisticated and his grasp of the issues in the trial of Robertson Smith were, in the first instance, beyond him. However, the cardinal point which emerged for Oman was the pursuit of truth as the primary aim of life. Oman was appalled to hear an elder say that "if Robertson Smith is right, if it is truth it is a dangerous truth, and he has no right as a professor of the Church, to upset the Church by declaring it".[77] This issue set the theological task for the rest of Oman's life. In the preface to the revised edition of *Vision and Authority*, published in 1928, he commented:

> I hope I have not since weakened in my loyalty to truth, but in those days I thought of intellectual truth the one worthy pursuit in life: and this suggested that the Church was not interested in it. Had I been intending the ministry, probably I would have been put off it, but this affected me somewhat as a call to my life's work.[78]

Oman's subsequent themes – the reconciliation of faith and freedom, grace as a nurturing relationship, the supernatural as an order of freedom, the imperative of honesty in religion – all of these have roots in the trauma of Robertson Smith's trial. Personal freedom became for Oman the *sine qua non* of theological inquiry and fundamental to understanding God, Christ and the Church.

3.3 David Macrae (1837-1907): a lesser case?

One puzzle remains: the ecclesiastical trial of the Reverend David Macrae (1837-1907).[79] The case was being dealt with in the courts of the United Presbyterian Church, contemporaneous with that of Robertson Smith in the Free Church. In 1879, the Synod of the United Presbyterian Church voted by 288 votes to 29 that "Mr

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[75] For primary reference, see *Vision and Authority*, 9-10; for secondary, Bevans, *Doctrine of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 7-10.

[76] *Doctrine of God*, 10. Bevans confirmed this point in conversation with Oman's son-in-law and grandson.

[77] *Vision and Authority*, 9.

[78] *Vision and Authority*, 9-10.

[79] *Dictionary,* 535-537. Macrae was born in Lathones in Fife and ordained into the ministry of the United Presbyterian Church in 1871.

Macrae should be no longer a minister of the Church".[80] Macrae's request was for liberty to question the eschatological teaching of the Westminster Confession, in particular its dogmatic assertion of fixed destiny and eternal punishment of the wicked. Macrae "claimed the freedom to hold and to teach within the Church the theory of conditional immortality or that of universal restoration".[81] It is puzzling that Oman should make no mention of this case when speaking about personal freedom. Macrae's views, and his appeal to the Church for the right to express them, undoubtedly caused heart searching amongst United Presbyterians. Cairns spoke at the Synod debate and stated that conditional immortality and universal restoration "would disturb the equilibrium of Christian theology".[82]

One can only speculate as to Oman's silence with regard to Macrae, a minister of his own denomination. At face value, no further reason needs to be sought other than the contingency that it was the Robertson Smith case that gripped Oman personally and changed him so deeply. Or, did the scholarly and historically celebrated status of Robertson Smith make him a more compelling example of martyrdom to personal conviction? Maybe, it is significant that Robertson Smith lived the latter part of his short life in Cambridge; it was from there that Oman spoke about the issue in his Inaugural Address as Principal of Westminster College.[83] Perhaps the issue was muddied by the question at stake. Oman never affirmed universalism and even entertained the idea of a lost soul.[84] But, then again, the affirmation of the right of someone to hold a contrary opinion to one's own is even more a test of freedom as a sacred principle. When Macrae is rescued from the archives of history, he stands as a worthy example of personal conviction courageously held.[85] In the annals of history,

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[80] *Cairns*: *Life and Letters*, 677.

[81] *Cairns*: *Life and Letters*, 676.

[82] Cairns: *Life and Letters*, 676.

[83] John Oman, "Method in Theology, "An Inaugural Lecture", *The Expositor*, 26 (August 1923).

[84] John Oman, "Individual" in *A Christian Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels,* edited by James Hastings, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1906), 815.

[85] In up to his death in 1907, Macrae had a career as a minister in Gilfillan Church (Congregational) in Dundee, as a journalist, novelist, temperance crusader and fervent Scottish nationalist. During his eighteen years as minister in Gilfillan Church the congregation rose to 1,300. Macrae remained a committed universalist in theology. See article by Needham in *Dictionary*, 536-537.

the story of Macrae and his fate shines as an instance of Oman's foundational belief that personal conviction of truth matters above all else. Truth is no respecter of persons and always comes at a cost; it would have added to, and not detracted from, Oman's championing of personal freedom had he made mention of Macrae.

Summary

This excursion into the question of heresy trials in the nineteenth century illustrates how difficult the Presbyterian Churches found it to reconcile faith and freedom. The existence of denominations is, in fact, illustrative of Oman's insistence that freedom cannot be corralled in institutions. Religious freedom, the gift of the Reformation and radicalised at the Enlightenment, could not be put into the old wines skins of Christendom. Presbyterianism dealt with the issue of individual assertions of conscience through its courts; but, by that means alone it did not come to a resolution of the matter. From great scholars like Robertson Smith to more doctrinally heterodox, but sincere, ministers such as Macrae, the question of freedom and belief cried out for reconciliation. Oman found a call in listening to the Smith case in Edinburgh; a call not just to study for the ministry, but a call to total endeavour of heart and mind to think through the impasse between the competing claims of freedom and faith. The way through would emerge from a new, relational understanding of divine-human relationships. Oman's solution recognised freedom, no less than faith, as a divine gift to be valued and an opportunity to glorify God. This section has shown that the agenda for Oman's theology of personal freedom grew out of empathy with the personal agony and fate of Robertson Smith, a martyr in the cause of intellectual freedom and commitment to the path of truth wherever that should lead. The hinterland to Oman's theology does not begin, however, with his experience of the Robertson Smith trial; it stretches back to an Orkney childhood and the impressions of an island, rural, adolescence.

4 Orkney Roots

From the macro parameters of denominations and their concerns, it is illuminating to turn to the micro picture of Oman's roots in Orkney. It was in Orkney that Oman was nurtured in the faith and much else: in folklore, custom and tradition. It was there

that he had a striking experience of the numinous at the standing stones at Stenness. Much later he would connect it, though critically, with Otto's concept of the non-rational element in religion. He wrote:

> When a boy of fourteen or thereabouts, I was riding through the Standing stones of Stenness on a winter afternoon when dusk was settling into darkness……The close-cropped heather cracked under my horses feet, the loch on the right was shining under the glow of sunset and the loch on the left was almost to blackness, and across the bay the gravestones in the churchyard stood white and clear above it. The circle of stones had the look of giants against the grey sky……a more numinous scene at a more numinous hour, could not have been found on earth. And the feeling which struck me is not inaptly described as the mysterium tremendum et fascinans.[86]

Nor was this an isolated incident; Oman had a sensitivity to the numinous that may even be termed habitual. In the *Natural and the Supernatural* he writes:

> I had been to church. I think the preacher had been expressing the absolute difference between good and evil under the material forms of heaven and hell. I went down to the edge of the water alone, and stood, a very small child, with the full tide at my feet. Along the smooth waters of the sound a path of sunshine carried the eye out to the open sea. It flashed upon me that if I dropped in and floated out, with endless sea around, I should be alone for ever and ever.[87]

To understand Oman the theologian, therefore, his Orkney roots are essential, especially with regard to his understanding of religion as apprehension of reality mediated through the senses. He would later, with Hume, come to understand that religion as an essential element in human nature and with Schleiermacher come to a deeper understanding of the religious consciousness. However, rational sophistication came later; for Oman, it could never be a substitute for elemental experience. Oman's mystic sensibility stirred amongst a windswept environment of the sea and land was the starting point for a spiritual and intellectual journey.

When Oman spoke of Orkney, he always did so with deep fondness and with humour. Stephen Bevans recounts his family circumstances. Oman was the second of

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[86] "The Idea of the Holy", *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 25 (April 1924), 282.

[87] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 137.

six children, four sons and two daughters.[88] His father Simon was captain of the mail boat to the mainland and farmed a small holding as well. Oman dedicated his Kerr Lectures, *Faith and Freedom*, to his father "a scholar only of life and action but my best teacher".[89] Local archives in Orkney show that Oman's father was involved in at least in one incident of bravery whilst at sea, rescuing passengers from an emigrant ship. A contemporary account reads:

> Captain Oman of the *Royal Mail* brought his steamer near the wreck of the 250 ton emigrant ship the *Albion,* a small boat unfortunately swamped as it reached the steamer, only 4 out of 15 rescued – the rest of the stricken vessel reached safety.[90]

However, the nuclear family was only a part of his formative experience. In a short paper entitled "The Orkneys", Oman recalled life in a rounded way, noting geography, history, language and folk customs as well as religious practice. The paper is undated, though it must stem from the early years of the twentieth century as Oman remarks: "there are only two ways of arriving, either via the Pentland Forth, some fifteen miles, from Shetland, a hundred miles north, unless the air-ship prove a third". He adds: there was an alternative as every child knew: "your father or the doctor found you at low-water amongst the sea weed".[91] Folklore was part and parcel of his early life. He knew "an old woman" recently deceased "who saw six fairies, less (in size) than new born babes, dressed in white with a red stripe down the front, dancing on a sunny broch". Oman smiles: "I am told that the fairies left because they could not tolerate the malt tax".[92] Weddings lasted all night and "home brewed ale was passed around in huge wooden cogs with three upright handles or lugs and nothing else is proper".[93] The minister always came to these events which were accompanied by the firing of pistols and fiddle playing.

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[88] *Doctrine of God*, 6.

[89] *Faith and Freedom*, frontispiece.

[90] Alistair and Anne Cormack, *Days of Orkney Steam* (Kirkwall Press, 1971), 79.

[91] "The Orkneys", Occasional Papers, WT/ 1/ 12-14.

[92] "Orkneys".

[93] "Orkneys".

The religious life of Orkney in Oman's formative years seems to have been congenial to an earthy humanity, far removed from the myth of a straight-laced Calvinism. Round the coast from the Old Man of Hoy, a householder had a sore loss:

> His wife and his cow were blown off the cliff together. Some months after wards the minister met him and proceeded to console him upon his loss. "Deed Sir" was the disconcerting reply, "as yae hae often said, but I never understood it as well before, the ways of Providence are wonderful. When the wife and the coo were blown over the cliff I thought I had a sair sure loss, but I gaed over to Graemsay and there I got a fair bonnier wife and a coo that is far better".[94]

Oman's great grandfather, John Wood, whose name carried down to Oman, was "the last man to wear a long waistcoat and silver buckles on his shoes" and a firm supporter of "all things established" including the established Church in Stromness.[95] The minister of the established Church, Mr Clouston, was Oman comments, "a very original character" having "four sermons which appeared like the phases of the moon".[96] On the island of Harry, the parish minister, Mr Johnstone would ask "is it advisable to have an evening service?" He would then announce the singing of three verses of Psalm 119 and address an elder in his pew saying: "We will go out and look!" Once outside the elder would gaze widely around the heavens and say, "Weel Sir! It's not looking good at all; that is an ugly cloud over Hoy";[97] and so, there was no evening service! These stories, no doubt spiced with poetic licence, reveal Oman in time and place, a living link with a lost world. It is interesting that Oman had family connections to the established Church. Perhaps most people had: the three strands of Presbyterianism – the established, the Free and the Secession –were of equal strength in the archipelago which had a total population of 32,000[98] at the time of Oman's writing. In a reflective mood, Oman commented on the impact of the Secession in the eighteenth century.

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[94] "Orkneys".

[95] "Orkneys".

[96] "Orkneys".

[97] "Orkneys"

[98] Orkney was obviously a more populous place in the late nineteenth century. The population in 2007 was 19,860. (Orkney: *Orkney Population change Final Report*, Orkney Council, 2009),1.

> The Secession not only created a genuine religious movement in those it attracted to itself but gave a great stimulus to the established Church which showed itself in the large numbers that came out at the disruption.[99]

The three Presbyterian denominations, Oman adds, "on the whole work harmoniously".[100]

4.1 The United Secession Church in Orkney

The minutes of Presbytery and Synod of the United Secession Church reveal a denomination with concerns both spiritual and social. For example, the minutes of Orkney Presbytery reveal a call to prayer for mission at home and abroad.

> The clerk read a call to prayer from the Foreign Mission Board earnestly inviting ministers, office bearers and members of the Church at home and abroad to unite in earnest prayer that God would at the present time fulfil his promises by granting a fresh baptism of the Spirit both to the Church at home and to workers and concerts in the mission field proposing that the week beginning Sabbath 17th February be observed.[101]

Obviously, prayer for a week reflects strength of faith and devotion. The Presbytery also held regular conference days devoted to what might be called practical religion. The minutes of 1888 record the details of a conference on preaching and, later in the year, at "Lammas", on the work of the Church. The schedule for the latter was as follows:

- A meeting of prayer on Monday 8.00pm
- Conference proper on Tuesday at 11.00am
- Evangelistic meeting on Tuesday at 8.00 pm
- Subjects for Conference:

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[99] "Orkneys"

[100] "Orkneys" This measured comment differs markedly from that of Ron Ferguson in his biography of George Mackay Brown; Ferguson quotes Iain MacLeod as saying "The three Presbyterian Churches differed very little in doctrine, but there was great enmity between them". MacLeod was referring to the Stomness congregations in 1937. Ron Ferguson, *George Mackay Brown: the wound and the gift* (Edinburgh: St Andrews Press, 2011), 30.

[101] Kirkwall Library founded in 1695 is the oldest public library in the United Kingdom. Church Archives OCR/1/5 Page 293.

- The state of religion in our congregations
- The work of the Church at home and abroad
- The care of the young
- The work of an elder
- All elders, managers, Sunday School teachers, collectors and other workers shall be invited to attend and take part and any members who please to come.[102]

Broader issues also concerned the Presbytery. The minutes reflect the deep conviction of the Seceder tradition that Church and state should be totally separate. Thus, with respect to the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland a lengthy resolution was past, "earnestly disapproving of the national establishment of the Church of Ireland". The resolution continued: "the establishment of Episcopacy in Ireland was a great error…it has been the source of numberless calamities ….and has kept up a rankling sense of injustice amongst the mass of the Irish people and evoked a spirit of disloyalty and rebellion".[103]Presbytery was on the winning side of history, the Church of Ireland was disestablished in 1870. The *Regium Donum* was simultaneously withdrawn from Presbyterian ministers in Ireland. It had been provided by William III as a counter poise to the Anglican establishment. The Presbytery of Orkney had, also, called for the *Regium Donum's* discontinuation. Interestingly, the ministers of the Secession Church in Ireland had compromised and accepted the royal patronage.[104] In any event, the picture the minutes give is of a Church alert to national issues and ever willing to advance its own view of relations between Church and state.

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[102] OCR 1/ 5 Page 243.

[103] OCR 1/2 Page 210.

[104] The history of the *Regium Donum* amongst Irish Presbyterians reflects ambivalence with respect to the state. The Synod of Ulster accepted it as a royal favour for the support of ministry from the beginning in 1690. The Reformed Presbyterians (Covenanters) resolutely and consistently rejected it. The Secession ministers originally declined it, but acquiesced in 1809. By then the gift was tainted by political compromise. After the rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798, led by Presbyterians including ministers, an oath of allegiance to the king was imposed before the *Regium Donum* was paid. The amount was £100, £75 and £50 depending on the size of the minister's congregation. See, R. F. G. Homes, *Our Irish Presbyterian Heritage* (Belfast: W. G. Baird, 1985), 97.

Germane to Oman's religious background in Orkney is the question of the procedures followed with regard to his call to the ministry. Oman was accepted as a student for the ministry in 1882 and in the following years, through to 1885, the Presbytery gave him "intersessional (sic) exercises".[105] These exercises indicate the seriousness with which the United Presbyterian Church took ministerial calling. Exercises included exegesis of scripture, preaching, examination in doctrine and maturity of personal religion. Oman's exercises for trial in 1885 are illustrative of the point. They are listed as:

- Personal Religion
- Theology – Regeneration
- Lecture – Romans 12: 1-2
- Homily –John 8: 31- 32
- Popular Sermon – 1st Timothy 1:15
- Exercise with address – 1sr Corinthians 2: 9-11
- Thesis: Is God knowable?

Given Oman's latter contribution to theology, these are interesting subjects. If one were to select a group of texts to illustrate the spiritual realism of Oman's mature theological perspective, these would be suitable for inclusion. The personal nature of faith, renewal of the mind, the relation of truth to freedom, the existential significance of the work of Christ, the transcendence of God and the crowning question, is God knowable? Certainly there are lines of continuity from Oman's United Presbyterian heritage to his later emphasis on the personal nature of spiritual reality. It would be wonderful had a record of Oman's responses remained extant. No record is extant. Oman transferred to Edinburgh Presbytery in 1886 "with a note of his trials for licence". In Edinburgh a range of influences open up. Oman would come under the influence of his spiritual mentor Principal John Cairns and his Professor of Moral philosophy and United Presbyterian minister, Henry Calderwood, would encourage him to take up translation of Schleiermacher.

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[105] OCR 1/ 5 Page 106; OCR 1/4 Page 251-2 ; OCR 1/5 Pages 11 and 68.

4.2 Victoria Street Congregation

Robert Small in his *History of the Congregations of the United Presbyterian Church 1733-1900* [106] portrays a history of the Secession in Orkney with many twists and turns. For example, in the parish of Orphir a minister was inducted to the Church of Scotland in 1746; the people resisted and the Church was shut down. Nothing happened for twelve months and then the Presbytery made a second attempt to induct the minister, with the aid of a troop of soldiers brought over from Caithness. The troops were to deal with any repeat of the protest. Sadly, one woman was killed and several people were injured.[107] The Secession Church in Orkney survived these turbulent years and became the largest of the three Presbyterian denominations.

In 1803, money was collected to build a Church in Stromness; Victoria Street was selected and in 1805 the work began; in 1806 the Congregation had 30 Communicants and two Elders; the congregation was then erected as a separate Congregation from Kirkwall. Yet growth was not rapid given the population of the town. The first minister, Andrew Wylie, was ordained in 1809 into a fellowship with 17 members and 160 adherents. But by 1837 the second minister, William Stobbs, reported 544 communicants of whom 60 were from the Parish of Stenness and 37 from Orphir. He was Superintendant of a Sabbath evening school with an attendance of 310 and his monthly prayer meeting had about 200-300 present.[108] An interesting aside to this early history of the congregation is the fact that of Mr Stobbs' family: one son joined the ministry of the Established Church and another son attended the United Presbyterian Theological Hall, but "became incapacitated for study." A third son was certified for study at the Hall in 1861; but attended for only one Session, before also joining the ministry of the Church of Scotland. Yet these changes in loyalty did not seem to have any detrimental effect on their father's ministry, or in the affection with which he was held. It is a further instance of a breadth of charity that seems to have characterised Oman's early experience of organised religion; and,

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[106] Robert Small, *The History of the Congregations of the United Presbyterian Church 1733-1900* (Edinburgh: David M. Small, 1904), 475-510.

[107] *History of the Congregations,* 482.

[108] *History of Congregations*, 491.

perhaps, not an insignificant fact in his reaction to the polemic and rancour that confronted the "island lad" in Edinburgh with the Robertson Smith affair. Indeed, one might even see the charity of his youthful environment as a factor in his later championing of personality, freedom and conscience.

The Victoria Street congregation provided Oman with spiritual nurture, through worship and Sabbath School. Oman's baptism is recorded as follows:

> John Wood Oman, son of Simon Oman and Isabella Rendall.
>
> Occupation of father Proprietor, Biggins, Parish of Stenness
>
> August 26th 1860 by Mr Stobbs.[109]

The day of the week was a Sunday, so it might be assumed that the baptism took place at worship, "before the congregation". Oman's father, Simon, was elected an elder in the congregation in 1878; however, he declined to take up the call. The Session minute reads;

> [The elders elect] appeared one by one before the Session who dealt with them one by one as to their soundness of piety and soundness in the faith and principles of the Church and, also, their acceptance of the call addressed to them by the congregation. Messrs John Craigie and Simon Oman declined.[110]

In the event, three of the five men elected by the congregation accepted the call. Perhaps, one could take Simon Oman's decline of the call to be an example of the independence of mind that Oman admired.

In other matters, the Kirk Session minutes reflect in miniature the mixture of piety and social concern that was evidenced in the minutes of the Presbytery and Synod. For example, members appear before the Session for quarrelsome conduct with fellow members, sharp business practice and for attending Plymouth Brethren services. Denial of "the privileges of communion" was the common sanction, usually followed by restoration. Discipline over sexual matters was not common. In an instant in 1867 of a "concealment of pregnancy", the case was to be "kindly dealt

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[109] Baptismal Register, 1853-1865. OCR, 30/11.

[110] Session Minutes, Victoria Street United Presbyterian Church, OCR 30/3 15th November 1878.

with by the moderator".[111] On a totally different front, the Kirk Session agreed to "grant a congregational meeting and collection in aid of emancipated slaves in North America whose claims will be advocated by a deputation of students from the Theological Hall Missionary Society".[112] Piety and social concern stretching near and far were the two hallmarks of United Presbyterianism in Orkney.

4.3 Oman's appreciation of his roots

Oman himself always spoke appreciatively of his religious upbringing, observing that influences from childhood and early life can never be fully measured, even by an individual himself. This would have been true, no doubt, with regard to the effects and intensity of congregational life in a small, homogeneous, community.

> Where people live so close to one another as they do in such places as Stromness, perhaps the personal influence which goes forth from a congregation can never be known till the consummation of all things. But that influence is the great matter. How many of us will carry the mark of it to the day we die? [113]

Oman was writing in 1906, in a volume of essays that marked the centenary of Victoria Street United Free Church, Stromness. He confessed that the name did not come easily to him for in his early years it had been the United Presbyterian or, colloquially, the "Secession" congregation. Oman was three years of age when Mr Stobbs died but he gives an interesting insight into how the minister of 34 years in the Congregation was long remembered. He writes.

> Of Mr Stobbs I heard more than any other person in the world. There was an old fashioned portrait of him, too, with white hair standing up, and something of the potentate and the parent in his face, seen in many houses to make him a reality.[114]

Oman continued, "perhaps there was some austerity" though this was understandable in the light of the times.

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[111] Session Minutes, 29th August 1867, OCR, 1/3.

[112] Session Minutes, 3rd June 1869. OCR, 1/3.

[113] Various Authors, *Victoria Street United Free Church Stromness* (Stromness: William Rendall, 1906, 39).

[114] *Victoria Street*, 33.

> When one thinks of Stromness of those days, with its harbour solid with storm stayed vessels, and its many public-houses full of sailors, the dancing and amusements upon which the Session frowned did perhaps lead to dangers requiring stern measures. In any case, there was mingled with the awe a very sincere regard and even affection for a minister who did watch for souls as one who must give account.[115]

As Oman continues, one recalls Stephen Bevans remark that Oman was "a theologian between two centuries",[116] he embodied both Victorian values and modern sensitivities. Oman was in touch with a diverse inner landscape. When he recalled Orkney, the Orkney of his upbringing, he was not remembering history *per se,* it was a folk memory that was part of his soul. He dipped into a collective consciousness that brought even the distant past into remarkable focus. Take his recollections of Congregational life:

> I have some kind of memory of disturbed thoughts about the use of a gown, of some dissatisfaction with shaving, and a lengthy series of discourses on the Heroes of the Faith.[117]

These events occurred during the ministry of James Nesbit, from 1865 to 1874, when Oman was a child and barely a teenager. He speaks with the same sense of familiarity about the ministry of the first minister, Andrew Wylie, who was there in the Congregation of Stromness from 1809-1826. It is worth repeating this lengthy quotation as an illustration of Oman's living sense of the past.

> I can never make out whether Mr Wylie was a preacher or not, but his influence must have been very wonderful. He began his work amidst all the evils which accompanied the French wars, when dissent and treason were regarded as very much the same thing, when there was a very rough element in the town and feeling was very bitter.[118]

This was in the time of his grandparents.

> In spite of that, he not only built up a large congregation, but I remember being told of how the worst of women in the town, and the war had done a great deal to make them worse than they were, mourned his loss. The people who were young when he died, and old

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[115] *Victoria Street*, 34.

[116] *Doctrine of God*, 18-40.

[117] *Victoria Street*, 32.

[118] *Victoria Street*, 32.

> when I knew them, still bore his image very tenderly in the depths of their hearts.[119]

Even allowing for the nostalgia that the occasion stirred (the centenary celebrations of the Congregation) it is remarkable how vivid the past remained in his present.

In Oman's adult years in the Stromness congregation the quality of the preaching made a lasting impression. Of the ministers who knew in his adult life, he begged indulgence to "speak with the disrespect of a contemporary".[120] In effect he pays a compliment. Of David Woodside, minister from 1881 to 1885, he says:

> To this day I have not ceased to admire the dogged energy with which Mr Woodside takes hold of a subject and tears the heart out of it or die in the attempt.[121]

He speaks of Thomas Simpson, 1894-1901, the first minister of the United Free Church, in a similar vane.

> A more honest and direct person …both in the pulpit and out of it, never existed, and these qualities exalted his preaching and all his ministry.[122]

In these comments we have echoes of the values Oman sought to impart to his own students later, in his lectures on practical theology. The spiritual impact of elders, too, comes in for praise.

> No institution, I believe, was ever served with more faithfulness, ability, and weight of character than the Presbyterian church by the eldership, and the old Stromness Session ranked high even in that honourable body.[123]

To this there is an important caveat.

> …it was only the men who decided things. But the highest and most beautiful life of the church seems to me to have been enshrined not in the men, but in the women. When people talk of the severity of the

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[119] *Victoria Street*, 32.

[120] *Victoria Street*, 34

[121] *Victoria Street*, 34.

[122] *Victoria Street*, 34.

[123] *Victoria Street*, 34.

> Presbyterian religion, I always think of the old ladies, perhaps especially the old maiden ladies, in the U.P. Kirk in Stromness.[124]

He gives examples again of childhood memories of "these very gracious old gentlewoman," recollections which came back to him "like the scent of clover across the sea".[125] Oman's relation to his spiritual roots in Victoria Street Congregation seems to have been one that nurtured natural affection, gratitude and enquiring faith.

Summary

This journey to Orkney has taught many things about Oman. It was by the Standing Stones of Stenness that, as a youth, he experienced the numinous in a powerful way; it was the vast expanse of sea and water that stirred his sense of infinity. From earliest experience, the natural intimated the supernatural and the finite the infinite. Oman's sense of the uniqueness of personality was, also, Orkney born. His childhood was peopled with characters, earthy and individual, unselfconscious and natural in their humanity. Oman's reminiscences dispel the myth of a Calvinistic straight jacket and dreary conformity. The Presbytery minutes of the United Secession Church, and the later United Presbyterian Church, reveal both a deep piety and a broad social concern. There is the element of discipline; but, it may be argued, its object is pastoral more than social control. Oman spoke fondly of his upbringing in Victoria Street Congregation of the United Presbyterian Church, especially of the women. His experience could not contrast more markedly than with that of George Mackay Brown, brought up in the same congregation but with a bitter sense of alienation.[126] The ministers, the elders, the women ministered to Oman the love of God. He was not blind to their imperfections; but, the failure of human nature was the occasion for compassion. If one were to look for the influence of grace upon personality, in keeping with the relational ways that Oman was to understand it in his later theology,

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[124] *Victoria Street*, 36.

[125] *Victoria Street*, 36.

[126] Fergusson comments: "He (Mackay Brown) associated the old women's judgmentalism with the Presbyterianism that he disowned and seemed to hate more and more". *George Mackay Brown*, 44. How contrasting this is with Oman's "very gracious old gentlewomen" memories of which wafted "like the scent of clover across the sea." Like the prodigal son and the elder brother, Mackay Brown's and Oman's experience of the one spiritual home could hardly have been more different.

one might well turn to the accounts of his Orkney childhood and young life. Orkney, for Oman, was peopled with personality, with souls living in the half light, where the ordinariness of earth reflects the splendour of heaven.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has located Oman's theology in the context of the ecclesiastical and religious mosaic that was late Victorian Scotland. Orkney roots, the nurture of the United Presbyterian Church, the personal influence of John Cairns, the intellectual awakening of the Robertson Smith case; all these contributed to the shape of Oman's theology. From these contexts emerged the ongoing themes characteristic of Oman's work.

First, the issue of freedom, so hotly debated in nineteenth century Scottish Presbyterianism, was a backdrop to Oman's theology of grace and personality. Oman grew up in an ecclesiastical and theological environment where the issues of freedom and faith were part of national debate. In time, Oman would argue that faith and freedom complement each other in a relational experience of grace and in the personal nature of reality, God's reality and ours.

Secondly, the priority of experience over intellectualisation began with Oman's Orkney childhood where he felt a sense of the numinous. It is not that, as a child, Oman could explain his experience of otherness and infinity; indeed, it is central to Oman's epistemology that he did not rationally comprehend; he experienced in the first instance and explanation came later. Oman, as a theologian, would subordinate the Bible, doctrine and the Church to the immediacy of personal encounter; one wonders if the confidence for such radicalism was inspired by a wholesome spiritual nurture. It may well have been that in Oman's experience of family, Church and community, love was first, and everything else was given its place.

Thirdly, Oman's ambiguous relationship to institutions, at once fearful of their power and acknowledging of their necessity, was coloured by first-hand experience of what the misuse of power can do to individuals who transgress institutional norms. The fate of Robertson Smith at the hands of the Free Church had a lasting impact on

Oman. The impact of the heresy trial may even have been atavistic, triggering a folk memory of the poor people of Orphir who suffered –some to the point of death – at the hands of dictatorial ecclesiastical power. In any event, the effect was that Oman's ecclesiology always set freedom above Church authority. This principle would give Oman's ecclesiology a distinctive shape, always tending towards the ideal though never leaving the empirical behind.

Fourthly, the theme of personal freedom had many strands in its making. A relaxed spiritual upbringing, the shock of the Robertson Smith trial, the person-centred approach of Cairns: all combined to reinforce what was an instinct in Oman's soul. In his island environment, Oman breathed an atmosphere were freedom had to be won in the face of danger at sea and toil on land; it was no abstract freedom, nor was faith its enemy. On the contrary, Oman experienced life in a community where faith was the ground and support of human endeavour and where reliance upon God nourished the love and courage vital to human survival, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Oman's idea of personal freedom was distinct from neo-liberal autonomy; it was a freedom carved out of the hardship of ordinary living. The ongoing intellectual journey from Orkney would be by way of two vital milestones: one philosophical and the other theological. It was as a student of philosophy in Edinburgh that Oman found that his philosophy teachers had an intellectual concern for personal freedom as an aspect of metaphysics. In his philosophical education, Oman was given the tools to expand his thinking and to come to clarity about his primary intuitions. The philosophical vision Oman found carried him forward to his second milestone, a theological appropriation of European intellectual traditions from the Reformation to the twentieth century. The next chapter takes up the first milestone, Oman's introduction to Scottish philosophical traditions.

Chapter Two

Oman and Scottish Philosophical Traditions

Introduction

In the nineteenth century, the hinterlands of religion and Scottish philosophy were part of a single intellectual landscape. David Boucher comments in his monograph, *The Scottish Idealists*:

> Scottish idealism was immensely spiritual in character and recognised no hard and fast distinctions between philosophy, poetry and science.[1]

The Scottish realist tradition was, also, essentially spiritual. Thomas Reid regarded the mind's ability to grasp first principles and "to judge those things that are self evident" as "purely the gift of heaven".[2] Reid's philosophical realism proved to be an intellectual helpmate to faith not least in America, through the influence of James McCosh.[3] However, by the mid-nineteenth Scottish philosophy was increasingly diverse in its interests and perspectives. Gordon Graham in his, *Scottish Philosophy, 1690-1960*, points out that John Veitch, in Glasgow, took philosophy in a literary and cultural direction; Alexander Bain, in Aberdeen, pursued a rigorous empiricism laying the foundation for modern psychology; Thomas Chalmers, in St Andrews, explored the philosophical roots of social responsibility.[4] Nor was Edinburgh exempt from change, though it took the form of evolution rather than a radical overturn of tradition. The Welsh idealist philosopher, Henry Jones,[5] had commented:

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[1] David Boucher, *The Scottish Idealists: Selected Philosophical Writings* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004), 7.

[2] Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense*, critical edition, edited by Derek Brooks (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

[3] James McCosh (1811-1894) was President of the College of New Jersey, later Princeton University, 1868-1888. See, David Hoeveler, *James McCosh and the Scottish intellectual tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[4] Gordon Graham, *Scottish Philosophy: Selected Writings, 1690-1960* (Exeter, Imprint Academic, 2004), 8-9.

[5] Henry Jones, 1852-1922. Presbyterian minister and philosopher. See David Boucher and Andrew Vincent, *A Radical Hegelain, the political and social philosophy of Henry Jones* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993).

Hegelianism "sits enthroned on every famous river in this island except the Forth".[6] In support of Jones's contention, one need only recall the remarks of Henry Calderwood in his Inaugural Lecture on taking up the Chair of Moral Philosophy in 1866. Calderwood expressed the hope that through his "privileged position" he would "render some important service to the truth" to the "Scottish Philosophy", "the philosophy of this land".[7] However, by the early twentieth century, Alexander Campbell Fraser and Andrew Seth Pringle Pattison had moved considerably from realism to a spiritual realism and personal idealism respectively. It was into this changing environment that Oman came in 1877 to read philosophy. He arrived aged seventeen, a mere "raw lad from the ends of the earth, with little equipment except a vast responsiveness to the intellectual environment".[8]

This is, perhaps, a good point to acknowledge the difficulty of contextualising Oman's thinking, either in philosophy or theology. A characteristic of his work is that it is free-standing. He gives a vision rather than a map with co-ordinates. In *The Natural and the Supernatural*, he explains the reasons for this approach. It is not that "he wants undue credit for originality by ignoring his intellectual ancestors".[9] It is, rather, that he thinks the proper place for names and sources is a text-book, and he even recommends one – George Galloway's *The Philosophy of Religion,*[10] where "a long list of authorities is given with learning and discrimination".[11] The reader of Oman, in consequence, has to do homework to establish the text beneath the text, to see what sources contributed to his thinking. With this caveat in mind, this chapter will examine the contributions to Oman's thinking of the two prominent streams of Scottish philosophy, realism and personal idealism.

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[6] Quoted by Oman in his review of *A Faith that Enquires*, in *The Journal of Theological Studies* Volume XXIV, (1923), 216.

[7] David Woodside and W. L. C. Calderwood, *The Life of Henry Calderwood* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1900), 167.

[8] F. G. Healey, *Religion and Reality* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1965), 9.

[9] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, Preface.

[10] George Galloway, *The Philosophy of Religion* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1914).

[11] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, Preface v.

Themes in outline

The first section examines the lines of continuity between Oman and some of the philosophers in the realist tradition. Calderwood, the most consistent realist, emphasised the importance of "person" in moral philosophy and this has clear echoes in Oman's use of the term. Campbell Fraser explored the idea of the universe as a spiritual reality, the medium for the divine-human dialogue. Both Fraser and Oman have a philosophical forbear in Berkeley, particularly in their understanding of nature as a system of divine symbols. Fraser, though starting from a realist position, sought to encompass the idealist insight that reality is fundamentally spiritual. There is something of the eclecticism that is characteristic of Fraser found in Oman as well. From Calderwood and Fraser the chapter moves to the philosophy of John Veitch, a consistent and tenacious opponent of Hegelianism. The striking emphasis in Veitch upon the holy, the mediating power of nature and the priority of experience over rationalisation makes for an obvious comparison with Oman.

In section two, the focus is on personal idealism. Whereas Scottish realism may be characterised as an antecedent influence; it was the old, established, philosophical tradition in Edinburgh. Personal idealism was a relatively more recent phenomenon: taking shape late in the nineteenth century and coming to maturity in the early twentieth. Andrew Seth Pringle Pattison, more than any other in Scotland, gave personal idealism its shape, writing some of its seminal texts.[12] Also in the personal idealist tradition was William Ritchie Sorley. His focus was on the moral aspect of reality and of personality. Sorley was contemporary with Oman at Cambridge and their work reveals important similarities and differences.

Throughout, the chapter will compare and contrast Oman with his teachers and his contemporaries. In particular, the chapter will posit that Oman's settled, or mature philosophical, context is amongst the philosophers of personality prominent at the end of the 1st World War. Oman, it will be argued, takes the theme of personality

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[12] Especially, Andrew Seth Pringle Pattison, *Hegelianism and Personality* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1887); and *The Idea of God in the light of Recent Philosophy* first edition, (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1917); second edition, (New York: Oxford University 1920).

and gives it a theological underpinning; he is in that respect both a child of his context and a creative thinker whose mind ranges freely across the common landscape of philosophy and theology. In conclusion, it will be noted that personal freedom is a recurrent theme in the philosophers reviewed. Oman's central concern with personal freedom was, therefore, not held in isolation; it was part of the philosophical environment in which he did his creative thinking.

1 Scottish Realists: Calderwood, Fraser and Veitch

1.1 Henry Calderwood

Henry Calderwood was born in Peebles in 1830 and was Professor of Moral Philosophy from 1866 until his death in 1896. Oman's friendship with Calderwood extended beyond his student days; and he paid tribute to Calderwood in the latter's biography.[13] Both were ministers in the United Presbyterian Church. However, it is with respect to Oman's thinking on personality, and what it means to be a person, that we are able to observe the proximity of their thought. In *Grace and Personality*, Oman defines personality in fundamentally moral terms – a moral person is "self-determined, according to his own self-direction, in the world of his own self-consciousness".[14] There is a mantra-like quality about this definition: self-determined, according to our own self-direction, in our own world of self-consciousness. Where does it come from? It is when we turn to Calderwood's *Hand-book of Moral Philosophy* that we find Oman's source. Calderwood's *Hand-book* was first published in 1872; it had run to its sixteenth edition and 14,000 copies by 1888. It was a text-book for students of philosophy and widely used as such. Calderwood's definition of personality reads:

> Man is self-conscious, intelligent, self-determining power –a Person, not merely living Organism, not a mere Thing, Personality involves

[13] W. L. C. Calderwood and Rev. David Woodside, *The Life of Henry Calderwood* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1900), 390-394.

[14] *Grace and Personality*, 44.

> self-conscious being, self-regulated intelligence and self-determined activity.[15]

Here is a definition of personhood, in essentials the same as Oman's. Personality is grounded in self-consciousness, shaped by self-directed intelligence and issues in self-determined activity. In Calderwood's subsequent digressions there is a rejection of deterministic theories of personality, either naturalistic or Hegelian. Positively, there is a Kantian affirmation of the centrality of will and of the unity of personality. In a person, will, intellect and consciousness cannot be compartmentalised. He writes:

> Intellect is knowing power. Will is controlling power. These two are so related that the one presupposes the other. The phenomenon of intelligence and the direction of intelligent activity are in constant relation.[16]

Likewise with Oman, when he moves from self-determination to self-direction, he cautions that "this is only another aspect of the same activity, and not a new attribute."[17]

In Oman's writing, however, the concept of personality does not remain static. In that respect, we have a contrast with Calderwood. For Calderwood, principles of morality are intuitive and self evident; conscience could err only in application, but not in principle, and Kant's categorical imperative has the force of universal law. With Oman, however, by the time he writes *The Natural and the Supernatural*, his concept of person is set in an evolutionary paradigm. He argues for a morality that is inspirational, ever reaching out to new insight, ever climbing new heights. Human beings develop in moral awareness and, therefore, the person can transcend the moral maxims characteristic of older intuitionalism. Oman writes:

> By what a man is he perceives what he should be…we thus, as it were, rise up on the stepping stones of our dead selves to higher things[18]

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[15] Henry Calderwood, *Hand-Book of Moral Philosophy,* sixteenth edition, (London: Macmillan, 1891), 26.

[16] *Grace and Personality*, 177.

[17] *Grace and Personality*, 51.

[18] *Morals*, an unpublished essay in Oman Papers, WT1/12-14, Westminster College, Cambridge, UK.

Accordingly, conscience, though sacred, may err and needs continual education; furthermore, the categorical imperative is inadequate to meet "the clamour of appetite and desire." The categorical imperative "could only rule them if they are well chilled already".[19] Thus the moral person is not free, but is being made free, through living in a higher environment. "We cannot be strong to do anything without a wide atmosphere to breathe in…" [20] This is the atmosphere of the supernatural, or, in terms of Oman's earlier work, the atmosphere of grace.

In *Grace and Personality*, Oman's great imaginative contribution was to hold together the autonomy necessary for the moral aspect of personality and the dependence on Divine aid that is characteristic of religious personality. The autonomy of self – self-determination, self-direction, self-consciousness – finds redemption from the dangers of introspection and self-centeredness in a dialogue of grace. Grace, for Oman, is essentially a relational, nurturing experience. It is an *I-Thou* relationship that aids personality to make a journey of self-realisation, under God or, more particularly, with God.

Interestingly, Calderwood in a short chapter on "Morality and its relation to Religion" affirms that the moral life is also the blessed life.

> The religious life and the moral life are thus essentially one, for we yield true homage to the author of our being when we use our whole nature aright, realising moral law in action, as having been vitalised in personal character.[21]

So, whilst writing from the perspective of the older intuitionalism, Calderwood too believed that moral maxims and religion combine in personality. As observed, the view that the religious life and a moral life are essentially one –and vitalised in personal character – is a good description of how Oman understood the outcome of grace in the human sphere.

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[19] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 303.

[20] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 304.

[21] *Handbook*, 317.

1.2 Alexander Campbell Fraser

The second of Oman's teachers, Alexander Campbell Fraser, was the father of Scottish philosophy in Edinburgh at the turn of the nineteenth century. Born in 1818, Fraser's life spanned that of four monarchs. He saw Queen Victoria come and go; he knew an old woman in his native Argyll who had been an eye witness to events at Culloden. He was born a son of the manse and his father came out at the Disruption. Fraser studied at New College, hoping to fulfil a call to the Free Church ministry. However, his destiny was to be in the field of philosophy. His life was not without stress. So troubled was his mind as a student that he was "environed in deepest darkness, and utterly deprived of the use of every faculty".[22] He found solace in Descartes and rested in the principle of moderation. Of opinions, he wrote, "the most moderate are probably the best, since extremes are commonly erroneous".[23]

Fraser describes the most significant encounter of his life as being with Sir William Hamilton. He writes: "I owe more to Hamilton than to any other influence".[24] The Edinburgh Town Councillors, who were the benefactors of the Chair of Philosophy, did not permit Hamilton to teach a "useless" subject like metaphysics. And so, Fraser was part of a select group that attended a metaphysics class at Hamilton's home in the evening. It must have been a stimulating time. Fraser, however, was not a blind follower of Hamilton and went on to edit Locke's *Essay,* as well Berkeley's works. These studies moved his thinking in the direction of a type of personal idealism, or what he preferred to call "spiritual realism." However, it was in his Gifford Lectures of 1894-96, published as *Philosophy of Theism,* that he gave an apologia for theistic faith.

In the themes Fraser lays out in his Gifford lectures, we find a perspective that carries through to Oman. Take, for example, the terms "natural" and "supernatural": Fraser uses these to describe reality in its two-fold aspect of material and spiritual.

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[22] Alexander Campbell Fraser, *Biographia Philosophica* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1905), 52.

[23] *Biographica Philosophica*, 58.

[24] *Biographica Philosophica*, 58.

> The complex order of nature is God speaking to us. The elaborate web, weaved according to laws of natural connection, is a means to an end of its being a revelation to us of each other and of God. Living in and through his order, we are living in and through his active providence; in a process that may be without beginning, and may persist without end – at once natural and supernatural – outward nature significant of super-nature with which it is animated."[25]

Like Oman, Fraser held that the natural world and the supernatural could not be understood apart from each other. Both appealed to Berkeley who posited that the physical world is a system of signs that mediate the transcendent. Much later, Oman would write:

> Berkeley has not been wrong in thinking, as one of his critics expressed it, that sense experience has the intelligibility of language whose conventions are one and all determined by a spirit akin to our own; and his argument against matter without meaning is valid to this day.[26]

It is in this last point – namely, that reality is fundamentally personal and meaningful – that Fraser's perspective was anticipatory of Oman's. Fraser uses a striking phrase: the Creator is "on speaking terms with humanity". Speaking is the operative word. Consciousness is not, as with neo-Hegelianism, a mere unfolding of cosmic reason. God can speak through the created order because, argues Fraser, that order is both natural and supernatural and virtually personal. It is because our human experience is personal that we can ascribe the attributes of personality to God. Our deepest relationship to one another is ethical trust; and our relationship to the universe is one where we trust its laws and rationality. So, asks Fraser:

> does this not mean that the universe is virtually personal, for us a revelation of a person rather than a Thing?....this practically means that our deepest relation to reality is ethical not physical: that *personality* rather than *thingness* is the highest form under which *man* can perceive God. This is the final moral personification, or religious conception, of the universe of experience.[27]

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[25] Alexander Campbell Fraser, *Philosophy of Theism,* second edition, (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1899), 131.

[26] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 170.

[27] *Theism*, 251.

As well as reality being personal, the universe was also for both writers essentially spiritual. In *The Natural and the Supernatural* Oman could write of atoms: "for aught that it (physics) can show, they may think".[28] And mind, Oman argued, may reasonably be taken as the presupposition of evolutionary processes, rather than the end result. "The mind by which we know everything, science included," is "first in principle".[29] This view of reality resonates with Fraser's phrase: "conscious life is the light of the world".[30] For Fraser, matter, apart from perception, is an unrealisable abstraction.

> The sciences themselves – physical, chemical and biological – exist only in and through the conscious activity of a person; so that it is through spiritual life and agency that existence is realised in sensation or in science.[31]

In this subjective idealism, or "spiritual realism",[32] there is a shared perspective. In their distinction between the natural and the supernatural, in their emphasis on the personal nature of reality and in the centrality of mind in their metaphysics, Fraser and Oman may be termed kindred spirits.

1.3 John Veitch

Probably the most consistent representative of Scottish realism was John Veitch, Professor of Logic and Rhetoric in the University of Glasgow from 1864 until his death in 1894. John Veitch was a school friend of Henry Calderwood in Peebles. They came to Edinburgh as undergraduates. Veitch was the son of a Free Church mother and a Church of Scotland father. His father had been in the Napoleonic wars. He wore a medal on Sundays to Church, but only to the Established Church. When he had occasion to go the Free Kirk with his wife, discretion was the greater part of valour: he left the medal at home!

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[28] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 245.

[29] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 264.

[30] *Theism*, 141.

[31] *Theism*, 141.

[32] "Spiritual realism" was Fraser's preferred term for his religious perspective. See, Alexander Campbell Fraser, *Berkeley and Spiritual Realism* (London: Thomas Constable & Co., 1908).

John Veitch also was intending to fulfil a calling to the ministry. But he too opted for a career as a philosopher. Unlike Fraser, he was a realist of what we may call the "unreconstructed" kind – a stout defender of Hamilton and an unyielding opponent of Hegelian influences in Scotland. Our particular interest in Veitch, however, arises from his reflections on poetry and on transcendence. He was a poet himself.[33] Veitch was especially inspired by border landscapes and collected the ballads of the Borders' poets. He considered poetic awareness as a bridge from the natural world to the transcendent. In his own words: "the poetry of Wordsworth is the natural complement to the realism of Hamilton."[34]

Oman, too, had an interest in the epistemological significance of poetry. Readers of Oman find digressions on poetry in the section "Knowledge and Knowing" in *The Natural and the Supernatural.*[35] There Oman asks the question: to whom shall we turn to find widest knowledge and the deepest meaning: to the scientist, or the philosopher, or to the poet and to the child?

> We shall, therefore, not betake ourselves to the scientist and the philosopher as authorities on what is known by awareness and apprehension, because they are precisely those persons whose eyes are in the back of their heads, looking for understandings and explanations, and who, even when they do look at their environment are most in danger of only seeing it with the their judgements and theories, but to the poet and the child whose gifts are for perceiving not for explaining.[36]

Oman was writing some thirty years after Veitch; nevertheless, there is shared appreciation of the place of poetry in the field of knowledge. Both believed that the natural world yields levels of meaning that are not accessible to discursive thinking. The quotation above is indicative of how Oman was the more polemical, setting the cognitive value of poetry above the conceptualities of science. Veitch, more accommodatingly, stressed the complementary nature of the rational and the

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[33] John Veitch, *Merlin and other poems* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1889).

[34] John Veitch, *Sir William Hamilton: The Man and his Philosophy* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1883), 49.

[35] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 120-143.

[36] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 125.

intuitive. "Science," he wrote, "observes and interprets in its own way, so does poetry". [37]

The "holy" is another area that makes for interesting comparison between Oman and Veitch. Oman ascribes his understanding of the holy to his reading of an essay by Wilhelm Windelband, *Das Heilige*, published in 1902.[38] For Windelband, experience of the holy is not a specialised aspect of awareness, nor the sphere of the irrational, but the ground of "Normalbewusstsein":[39] normal consciousness of truth, goodness and beauty. Oman is particularly strong on this emphasis on the "normality" of the holy; it was the basis of his criticism of Rudolf Otto.[40]

Veitch does not speak of experience of "the holy" *per se*. However, in his descriptions of how human beings experience transcendence, he touches on similar issues. Veitch believed that experience of transcendence is realised "by most reflective minds",[41] though the poet experiences it at its "highest reach".[42] In a collection of essays, published in 1895, under the title "Dualism and Monism",[43] he reflects on how the mind can "be equally open to the world of sense – the finite, and to the sphere of the infinite that borders and surrounds this world of ours".[44] The resulting experience is one of awe and reverence.

> There is revealed to us that far wider and higher sphere of being which holds for us awe, reverence, and rebuke, incentives to action here that can never allow us to rest in the sphere of mere contentment of earthly enjoyment or bounded prospect.[45]

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[37] *Hamilton*, 49.

[38] Wilhelm Windelband, *Präludien* 6th Edition, Vol, 2, (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr(Paul Siebeck)1919).

[39] *Präludien*, 304. (Das heilige ist also das Normalbewusstsein des Wahren, Guten und Schönen, erlebt als transzendente Wirklichkeit.) The original is in Gothic script.

[40] John Oman, Review of "The Idea of the Holy" in *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 25 (April 1924). also *Natural and Supernatural*, Appendix A. For critical perspective on Oman, see John Macquarrie, *Twentieth Century Religious Thought* (London: SCM, 1998), 72.

[41] John Veitch, *Dualism and Monism* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1895), 175.

[42] *Dualism and Monism*, 175.

[43] John Veitch, *Dualism and Monism* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1895),175-221. "The Theism of Wordsworth"

[44] *Dualism and Monism*, 177.

[45] *Dualism and Monism*, 181.

The reference to "incentives to action" is significant. The experience is not merely a matter of awe, but carries with it moral imperatives. As Veitch continues, he reiterates that such experience is "a catholic element" in humanity: to "feel and know a Transcendent Power" is "not a peculiarity of the individual, but open to every man who has singleness of vision and purity of heart".[46] Veitch – like Oman in relation to the holy – would argue that experience of transcendence is part of normal consciousness.

Veitch gives a privileged role to nature. It is landscape and environment that for Veitch are most likely to raise consciousness to an awareness of a Presence "above" and "beyond" the natural. He describes the impact of his native Borders.

> Its hills and glens, widespread moorlands had nourished it, for nowhere does a man feel his littleness more, nowhere does he feel the awing, and purifying of solitude and mystery greater than on the far reaching, often mist darkened, moorlands of "the north cuntré".[47]

Oman, too, gives a key role to nature, but only in the early evolution of human experience. He may well have categorised Veitch's description of the impact of the natural world as an instance of primitive religion,[48] an example of the "awesome" holy. Or, to use another Oman concept, Veitch's description of the revelatory power of nature is an instance of the "particular" holy, inspired by places and objects, like the standing stones in Stenness, the altar in the tabernacle, or the binding of the Koran.[49] It is arguable, however, that whilst Veitch shows a particular relish for awe and mystery, his views as they develop are compatible with Oman's wider categorisation of the holy. Oman believed that the primitive holy has the potential to evolve into ethical awareness, moral sensitivity and binding conviction, apart from any material context.[50] A similar continuum is observable in Veitch. Awe can be

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[46] *Dualism and Monism*, 214.

[47] *Dualism and Monism*, 185.

[48] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, Chapter 22, 372-389.

[49] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 65.

[50] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 308.

"sublimated" into a "revelation of moral and spiritual truth.[51] Thus, when Veitch digresses on his own experience of awe, he explains it in fundamentally moral terms.

> This power independent of me, outside of me, yet uniform, passing on before me in endless process-vision, yet linked to me in bounds of reason, feeling and imagination, makes me patient, observant, teaches me waiting and reverence. [52]

This link, in terms of "reason, feeling and imagination", indicates that for Veitch, too, experience of the Infinite is never simply context bound, nor purely irrational, and always has the potential for refinement. It also holds for Veitch that such experience is part of "normal consciousness". Nature may have a privileged role to play as epiphany; poetry may be well suited to cognitive expression; but these do not negate a sense of transcendence – of the holy – in ordinary experience.

Though Oman came to his understanding of the holy via Windelband, Veitch illustrates that an interest in poetry and knowledge, in reverence and transcendence – in what would later be termed the numinous – was not unknown in the Scottish philosophical tradition. Veitch's philosophy of nature was a forerunner of key elements in Oman's epistemology and it is difficult to imagine that Oman would have been unaware of Veitch's published work.

Summary

Oman wanted to avoid a text-book genre, and so there is no paper trail to sources and influences. But perhaps a modest claim can be made to having found text beneath the text of Oman's work: not text shining vividly beneath the surface, but more like an archaeological artefact, suggestive of earlier inhabitants on the site. Setting Oman's work in an historical perspective enables the reader to see how some of his main themes were anticipated. With respect to Henry Calderwood, there is quite a direct link to Oman's definition of personality. In the work of Alexander Campbell Fraser, there is a complementary metaphysics, built around the relation between the natural and the supernatural, and a vision of reality that is spiritual and personal. Fraser's use

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[51] *Dualism and Monism*, 187.

[52] *Hamilton,* 49.

of the terms "natural" and "supernatural", in his Gifford lectures of 1889, were worthy of acknowledgement by Oman. John Veitch, in 1895, wrote concerning poetry, knowledge and experience of transcendence. It would have been interesting had Oman brought Veitch's insights into his discussion.

Finally, because of Oman's extensive knowledge of Schleiermacher and Ritschl, he is rightly credited with keeping alive liberal protestant thought in the English speaking world. Perhaps his failing was not to acknowledge his Scottish philosophical antecedents. In late nineteenth century Scotland there was lively debate of the very issues that Oman deemed important. Had Scottish philosophers been more engaged by Oman they would have made a worthwhile contribution to his work.

2 Personal Idealists: Sorley and Pringle Pattison

Personal idealism was an affirmation of the importance of self, or personality, within total reality. It was a philosophy born of reaction to absolute idealism where self consciousness was absorbed in the larger consciousness of the whole. In a memorable phrase, Francis Herbert Bradley and Bernhard Bosanquet maintained that the individual's mode of being is "adjectival", as opposed to "substantive".[53] The foremost personal idealist in Scotland was Andrew Seth Pringle Pattison (1856-1931) whose influence stretched far afield. Another advocate of a "person-centred" approach was fellow Scotsman, and Cambridge philosopher, William Ritchie Sorley (1855-1955). Both had a strong concern for the theistic implications of personal idealism, and this makes them interesting for comparison with Oman. In examining the writings of Pringle Pattison and Sorley the object is not, as with Oman's realist teachers, to establish common philosophical roots or antecedents. Rather, it is to find a common approach to common problems. All three were, in various ways, personally affected by the war. Oman worked for a time in France, and in the Midlands, helping in military hospitals with the YMCA. He was also a critic of jingoism and a supporter of conscientious objectors. Pringle Pattison and Sorley each

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[53] David Boucher, (ed) *The Scottish Idealists,* Library of Scottish Philosophy (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004), 9.

lost a son amongst the soldier casualties of the War. They dedicated their respective published lectures to their memory. By 1918, therefore, a new cultural and intellectual reality had dawned. There had been, in Oman's words, "a definite close in measureless destruction of an age".[54] Amongst the challenges which the war bequeathed to philosophy was to reckon with the reality of moral evil, as well as to establish the worth and dignity of personality.

2.1 W R Sorley

William Ritchie Sorley was born in Selkirk, in 1855, where his father was a Free Church minister. He studied for the ministry at New College and took semesters in Tübingen and Berlin. However, like many others, he moved from theology to a career as a philosopher. Nevertheless, his interest in theology never waned and he remained a practising Christian. Sorley read philosophy at Trinity College, Cambridge. Then, after university appointments in London, Cardiff and Aberdeen, he returned to Cambridge as Professor of Moral Philosophy in 1900. He held this post until his retirement in 1933.

Sorley's main published work was *Moral Values and the Idea of God*.[55] There he sets out to find in moral and ethical experience a guide to ultimate reality. In the opening sentence, he summarised his task.

> The purpose of the present work is to enquire into the bearing of ethical ideas upon the view of reality as a whole we are justified in forming. The argument begins with a discussion of values and ends with the idea of God.[56]

En route from his discussion of values to his theistic conclusions, Sorley affirms the importance of persons. Influenced by the subjective idealism of Berkeley, he argues that the individual, or "centre of conscious life", is the "first clue to the nature of

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[54] John Oman, Review of A. Seth Pringle Pattison, *The Idea of God in Recent Philosophy Journal of Theological Studies,* 19 (January and April 1918), 278-279.

[55] W. R. Sorley, *Moral Values and the Idea of God* The Gifford Lectures delivered in the University of Aberdeen in 1914 and 1916, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1918).

[56] *Moral Values*, 1.

reality and value".[57] An individual, capable of choosing moral values, presupposes that there is a moral order in which values are grounded. He writes:

> It follows therefore that the value or goodness actually achieved in personal life implies as its ground or condition a standard or ideal of goodness. Accordingly, we are compelled to form the conception of an ideal good or of a moral order….[58]

This moral order, which is the source and inspiration of values, may be given the name God.

> God must therefore be conceived as the final home of values, the Supreme Worth – as possessing the fullness of knowledge and beauty and goodness and whatever else is of value for its own sake.[59]

In this way, Sorley makes a progression from the values embedded in experience, to persons, to the moral order and, finally, to God.

This is only one half, however, of Sorley's ethical idealism. In the second half of his lectures he was concerned to affirm the place and function of the natural world. It is the merit of traditional theism, he believed, that has a place for both the natural and the ethical. The natural order and the moral order are equally important to the functioning of the whole, and part of God's purpose and design.

> If the moral order is not altogether sundered from the natural order, if the universe is really a universe and not a multiverse, then we must hold that the moral order is the order of that one mind whose purpose nature and man are fulfilling. Here therefore we have a key to the theistic interpretation of the world.[60]

That the natural order and the moral order fulfil a divine purpose was a bold affirmation in a post Darwinian world. Sorley's case, however, does not rest on evolution *per se*. Rather, it is an argument based on moral values and their transcendent point of reference. The transcendent realm of ideals, a realm that is as real as the physical world, exists apart from the evolutionary process.

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[57] *Moral Values*, 477.

[58] *Moral Values*, 477.

[59] *Moral Values*, 457.

[60] *Moral Values*, 458-9.

> It is not owing to natural selection, but rather in spite of it, that the mind of man affirms an affinity with truth and beauty and goodness, and, undismayed by opposition, seeks its home among ideals. To them as well as to nature the mind of man has adapted; and this adaption can neither be explained nor explained away by biological laws.[61]

There is, therefore, a "design greater than Paley ever dreamed of".[62] It is a design not reducible to, nor circumscribed by, the natural world, but reflected in the adaption of the human mind to an objective transcendent realm of value.

> The order of truth which the intellect discovers and an order of moral values which the reason acknowledges are objective characteristics of reality, and they are reflected in the mind of man.[63]

Importantly, nature serves this transcendent realm. It is in the natural world that transcendent ideals are realised. Human beings, we might say, have a foot in both camps, straddling the divide between the world of physical causality and higher values. Sorley comments: though the "selective processes of nature don't specifically favour those who cherish values highly, or reward those who devote their lives to the service of ideals",[64] the world of nature "may be regarded as a fit medium for the fashioning and training of moral persons".[65]

> Nature is the medium only; *through* it the end is to be reached. But minds are not a mere medium; it is *in and by* them that values are to be realised.[66]

In this way, Sorley arrives at an ethical theism that links experience, the natural world and transcendent value.

In his last lecture, Sorley develops his idea of God. Experience, having yielded moral values to the seeking soul, points to God as "the conscious ground of this moral order".[67] If we are to go further and speak about the nature or being of God,

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[61] *Moral Values*, 327.

[62] *Moral Values*, 326.

[63] *Moral Values*, 326.

[64] *Moral Values*, 236.

[65] *Moral Values*, 504.

[66] *Moral Values*, 460.

[67] *Moral Values*, 479.

we must turn to personal categories, for these are the highest we know: "the divine is limited by the analogy of the spirit of man to the spirit of God".[68] The Divine and human meet as the purposes of God are realised in the human spirit.

> Men are free to work out their purposes, and, at the same time, there is a divine purpose in the world which human history fulfils and to which the environment of nature is subordinate. The divine purpose is that values should be realised in man's nature, and it can be realised only by man making this purpose his own.[69]

The personal nature of the relationship between God and human beings is of primary importance. Humans are free to pursue divine purposes or to frustrate them. For Sorley, these purposes are discovered not in specific religious activities but in the total spectrum of life. God's approach, through the "whole region of common life", as well as in "our dealings with nature and ordinary social relations"…."always respects free will".[70] Consequently, "the theological doctrine of irresistible grace is relinquished".[71]

> In meeting and welcoming the divine grace man's spirit is not passive but responsive; and the divine influence comes as a gift and not by compulsion. "Behold I stand at the door and knock." said the Master. Entry is craved, not forced.[72]

And so, Sorley concludes that, "in love, spirit appeals to spirit in virtue of their affinity".[73] But the soul, nevertheless, may be so preoccupied with routines, or be so immersed in "lower interests", that it remains deaf to the call of God. On the other hand, if the soul should answer the call, it discovers "its essential nature and spiritual destiny"; and it also finds its "freedom in fulfilling the divine purpose".[74] All in all, personality, nature and history find their *raison d'être* in God's final and ultimate purpose of love. This purpose can be experienced in time and space as communion

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[68] *Moral Values*, 490.

[69] *Moral Values*, 493.

[70] *Moral Values*, 494.

[71] *Moral Values*, 494.

[72] *Moral Values*, 494.

[73] *Moral Values*, 494.

[74] *Moral Values*, 495.

and fellowship; but it also transcends any earthly appropriation, and awaits eschatological fulfilment.

2.1.1 Sorley and Oman

If we compare Sorley's work to that of Oman, we have a good example of the shared horizons. The emphasis on human autonomy, the dignity of personality and the personal nature of grace are central for both thinkers. Most notably, Sorley abandons the traditional concept of irresistible grace. In divine-human relations there is an absence of all coercion and an invitation to free response. This was the cardinal idea in Oman's *Grace and Personality*. One could say that *Grace and Personality* was an in-depth theological reflection on this fundamental insight.

The sphere in which grace, as relationship, is realised is, for both writers, the natural world. What Sorley describes as the "whole region of common life" is, for Oman, the "whole breadth of experience". There is for each something of a disenchantment with organised religion and a belief in the universality of God's presence, awaiting to be realised in secular vocation. Grace for Oman is,

> not merely in some special sacred sphere of ecstasy or rite or even duty. Nothing less is at stake than the whole nature of the world when rightly used as God's world.[75]

In these insights and emphasis there is, one could argue, an anticipation of the secular Christianity of theologians such Bonhoeffer and Ronald Gregor Smith.[76] Experience of war in any era inevitably exposes institutional marginality.

It is illuminating, also, to compare Sorley's *Moral Values and the Idea of God* with *The Natural and the Supernatural.* Although the latter was written over twenty years later, in 1931, there are broad continuities. For example, methodologically Oman, like Sorley, begins with a bottom-up approach and is scathing of abstraction. He writes:

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[75] *Grace and Personality*, 81.

[76] Jeffrey C. Pugh, *Religionless Christianity: Bonhoeffer in troubled times* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2008); Ronald Gregor Smith, *Secular Christianity*, (London: Collins, 1966).

> Unless theology is, like true science, about experience and not in place of it, it is worthless.[77]

However, Oman focuses on experience on a wider front than moral awareness. The reality of the transcendent for Oman is apprehended through the ideal values of truth and beauty, as well as through moral sensibility. Sorley, of course, recognised the intellectual and aesthetic aspects of experience, too; but he believed that moral values are primary.

> Man is not a cognitive being in the first instance, and only thereafter an active being. Knowledge is sought by him in virtue of some interest; and the interest in knowledge for its own sake is a late interest.[78]

In contrast, for Oman, beauty takes the lead. The human quest for beauty is "the true search for unity and harmony and perfection in all things".[79] For instance, in morals, a search for beauty inspires "striving for harmony in thought and action". [80] Equally, in a highly intellectual field such as science, "beauty is a conspicuous element in the abstract completeness aimed at in the higher mathematics".[81] Beauty, Oman concludes, "ought at least to be the inspiration of the study of all life".[82] In a secondary sense, beauty belongs to religion. However, this latter belonging has been often a negative experience. Beauty suffers at the hands of religion because of traditional piety. Oman writes:

> …by few things has it been limited and stereotyped and formalised more than by having imposed upon it narrow or external or sentimental or traditional forms of piety.[83]

Yet, beauty is an essential part of "true religion" in that "a sense of beauty and a sense of the holy are not far apart".[84] Neither beauty nor the holy live "by the clear hard light of understanding" but rather by "intuitions and anticipations which go far

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[77] *The Natural and the Supenatural*, 97.

[78] *Moral Values*, 25.

[79] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 209.

[80] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 210.

[81] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 211.

[82] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 211.

[83] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 210.

[84] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 210.

beyond what can be justified by understanding".[85] In this focus on aesthetics, Oman reveals the abiding legacy of Schleiermacher; whereas Sorley, in his moral emphasis, is a disciple of Kant.

Beyond these differences, however, there is a shared conviction that the natural world and the world of values belong together in One Divine reality. Of the intimate connection between the material and the spiritual, the natural and the supernatural, Oman writes:

> The two are not in opposition, but are so constantly interwoven that nothing may be wholly natural or supernatural.[86]

For Oman, this duality in unity is the proper context in which to understand evolution. Freedom and purpose transcends material determinism; but evolution may be spoken of as fulfilling a Divine purpose. Oman uses the language of evolution as descriptive of how humans "adapt" to their spiritual environment. There is a "selection" at the level of spiritual environment that mirrors the evolution in the natural world. Oman draws the following analogy between the challenge of natural environment and that of the spiritual. "The creature that has learned to live in the air, if it returns to the water, does not become a fish but a corpse"; so, with respect to the absolute values or our spiritual environment, "the Supernatural is only a higher bar of judgement being a sacred call and a decisive opportunity".[87] At the human level – as Oman sees it – evolution has consequences not less grave than in the other spheres. He concludes: "Man is the only creature we know who has consciously entered into this heritage".[88] Or, as Sorley expresses it, "conscious purpose is known to us directly only as it exists in the mind of man".[89] In these ways, for both thinkers, all of reality – natural and spiritual – is construed in an evolutionary paradigm. Divine purpose cannot be proven from the material world, but it is a valid postulate of human consciousness.

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[85] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 210.

[86] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 72.

[87] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 294.

[88] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 280.

[89] *Moral Values*, 417.

Summary

Oman and Sorley have a great deal in common, even though with contrasting emphases. They have a mutual philosophical antecedent in the thought of Alexander Campbell Fraser, for whom Sorley worked as an assistant. Fraser also sought to understand the natural world within a spiritual perspective, and all three acknowledge a debt to Berkeley.[90] But, apart from shared roots, Sorley and Oman have a family resemblance in their articulation of a theism that is grounded in experience, affirmative of freedom, protective of personal autonomy and integrating of the natural world in a larger spiritual whole. With regard to theology, Sorley and Oman set aside "irresistible grace" in favour of grace as love, gift and invitation.

2.2 Andrew Seth Pringle Pattison

Pringle Pattison was a transitional figure between the Scottish realism of the late nineteenth century and the personalism of the early twentieth.[91] He was born in Edinburgh in 1856, and baptised Adam Seth. Later, he changed his name to Pringle Pattison as a condition of receiving a bequest: the Haining Estate, near Selkirk, in the Scottish Borders. In 1878 he graduated from Edinburgh and, afterwards, went to study in Germany. On return to Edinburgh in 1880, he became an assistant to Alexander Campbell Fraser, in succession to William Ritchie Sorley. He held various appointments in the Universities of Wales and St Andrews before succeeding Fraser in 1891 as Professor of Logic and Metaphysics. It was a post he held until his retirement in 1919.

Recent, renewed interest in Scottish philosophy in the early twentieth century regards Pringle Pattison not merely as transitional but pivotal to the emergence of personal idealism. David Boucher writes:

> Andrew Seth is of immense importance in the history of British Idealism because for years after he edited what was the manifesto of

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[90] Sorley makes a distinction between "Idealism" of the "Platonic type" and that of Berkeley. He adds: "the view at which this book has arrived is of this latter type." *Moral Values*, 468.

[91] Gordon Graham, "The Nineteenth Century Aftermath" *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment* Edited by Alexander Broadie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2003), 338-350.

> Scottish Hegelianism he more fully developed his doubts he had hinted at earlier. He now questioned the metaphysical conclusions that Absolute Idealism projected and was at the forefront in Britain of leading the revolt against them and championing the cause of personal idealism.[92]

Even more recently, Cairns Craig, in his panoramic review of Scottish philosophical culture since the Enlightenment, argues that Pringle Pattison's criticism of the Kantian-Hegelian tradition and his return to the Scottish tradition was, in effect, a quest for a post-modern philosophy. It was Pringle Pattison, argues Cairns, who cleared the way for the constructive thinking of John Macmurry, later in the twentieth century.

> In Seth's effort to create a post-modern philosophy by a return to Scottish traditions and by a critique of the whole Kantian-Hegelian tradition we can see a pre-figuration of the most important philosophy of the twentieth century, that of John Macmurry…[93]

This contemporary evaluation of Pringle Pattison's significance finds support when one considers his personal journey from neo-Hegelianism to personal idealism. From his seminal works – *Essays in Philosophical Criticism*,[94] *Hegelianism and Personality*[95] and *The Idea of God in Recent Philosophy*[96] – it is clear that Pringle-Pattison's personal idealism was born of considerable heart-searching, and of rigor in sifting competing intellectual opinions.

Essays in Philosophical Criticism was the "manifesto of Scottish Hegeliansim".[97] It was dedicated to the memory of Thomas Hill Green and the *Preface* was written by Edward Caird. The volume aimed to carry forward the work of Green for whom

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[92] David Boucher, (Edited and Introduced) *The Scottish Idealists* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004), 8-9.

[93] Cairns Craig, *Intending Scotland: explorations of Scottish Culture since the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 169.

[94] Andrew Seth and R .B. Haldane, edited *Essays in Philosophical Criticism* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1883).

[95] Andrew Seth, *Hegelianism and Personality* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1887).

[96] Andrew Seth Pringle Pattison, *The Idea of God in the Light of Recent Philosophy* first edition, (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1917); second edition, (New York, Oxford university Press, 1920).

[97] *Scottish Idealists*, 8.

philosophy was not "a study of the words of men that are gone" but "a life expressing itself with that power and authority which belongs to one who speaks from his own experience, and never to the "scribes" who speak from tradition".[98] Seth, as he was then known, as well as being joint editor, contributed an essay entitled: "Philosophy as Criticism of Categories". The essay was devoted to a critical examination of Kant's polar categories of the phenomenal and the noumenal. It was on Kant's part "a mischievous step" to isolate "the conditions, principles or categories from the experience in which they are disclosed to us".[99] On the contrary, argued Seth:

> The individual is individualised only by his relations to the totality of the intelligible world.[100]

Clearly, at this early point in his thinking, he was within an Hegelian perspective. Within four years of the publication of *Philosophical Criticism* things became very different. In 1887, in Seth's second series of Balfour Lectures, published as *Hegelianism and Personality*, he gave a cogent criticism of absolute idealism coupled with an affirmation of the importance of personality in metaphysics.

> The radical error both of Hegelianism and of the allied English doctrine I take to be the identification of the human and the divine self-consciousness, or, to put it more broadly, the unification of consciousness in a single Self.[101]

Idealism, he believed, is a valid philosophy but only if it finds a place for the threefold reality of nature, personality and God. The merit of idealism is its affirmation of unity. Within that unity, the individual has a key role to play, not as a means to an end, but as an end. "Self", he writes, "is the very apex of separation and differentiation".[102] This is in contrast to the absolute idealism of, for example, John Scott Haldane, who saw personality in terms of its contribution to social unity.

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[98] *Philosophical Criticism*, 3.

[99] *Philosophical Criticism*, 16.

[100] *Philosophical Criticism*, 34.

[101] *Hegelianism and Personality*, 215

[102] *Hegelianism and Personality*, 217.

> …..personality is no mere personality of one individual amongst others. We find in social life that it unites and does not separate us.[103]

For Haldane, the only personality one can truly speak of is the personality of God, in which the whole of experience finds unity.[104] It is important to note, however, that, though disagreeing with neo-Hegelians and absolute idealists Seth maintained a great respect for Hegel.

> In all this, Hegel is the protagonist of Idealism in the historical sense of that word, and champions the best interests of humanity. It is Hegelianism as a system, and not Hegel, that I have attacked.[105]

Pringle Pattison's[106] reflections in the *Idea of God*, published in 1917, continued to develop a twofold emphasis: an idealist insistence on Mind and unity, together with an insistence on diversity and personality. It was a narrow road to travel and the alternative seemed broad on either side. If self is not, as the absolute idealists thought "adjectival", then could it be that reality is in fact fundamentally pluralistic? This was the course taken by radical pluralists like Pringle Pattison's contemporary, J.M.E. McTaggart.[107] The latter posited that finite selves "exist in their own right" in a "systematic whole", and in "reciprocal dependence".[108] But, reciprocal dependence was too "weak" a concept for Pringle Pattison. Just as humanity stands in an organic relationship to nature, so the humanity is also organic to God. Ideals are the presence of God, immanent in the human spirit. He writes:

> But as soon as we begin to treat God and man as two independent facts, we lose hold on the experienced fact, which is the existence of *one in the other and through the other*.[109]

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[103] John S. Haldane, *Materialism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932), 131.

[104] *Materialism*, 131.

[105] *Materialism,* 230.

[106] As a condition of inheriting the Haining Estate, in the Borders, Seth adopted the name Andrew Seth Pringle Pattison.

[107] John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart: Cambridge philosopher and Trinity College Lecturer 1897-1923. Baptised John McTaggart Ellis, he took the name McTaggart for the sake of inheritance from his uncle.

[108] *Idea of God*, 391-392.

[109] *Idea of God*, 254.

Thus, it is clear why critics accused Pringle Pattison of never resolving the essential conflict between idealism and personalism.[110]

However, little attention has been given to his attempts to find a solution. In two articles in *The Philosophical Revue* of 1892,[111] he makes a distinction between metaphysics and epistemology, a distinction which he consistently maintains. His argument is that knowledge is always "trans-subjective" and presupposes a relation between knower and known. But, this doesn't, he argues, obviate metaphysical identity. This point, he believed, was often obscured by neo-Hegelians.

> Hegelianism, in fact, offers an eminent example of the confusion between Epistemology and Metaphysics on which I am dwelling. With Hegel the essence of the universe is thought, here in the subject, and thought there in the object; and there is some temptation, therefore, to think that metaphysical identity absolves us from epistemological enquiry. But, this is not the case. However much the objective world and the individual knower may be identified in essence, the objective thought which he recognises is still trans-subjective…[112]

Pringle Pattison adds that "Hegelians are not the only sinners in this respect".[113] If it were the case that Hegelians "swamped epistemology in metaphysics", it is also the case that realists of the Scottish school were guilty of projecting the dualism inherent in knowledge into reality. Often, the so called "natural realist" was left defending metaphysical dualism of mind and matter as two generically different substances. Thus, realism "falls at once into the most un-philosophical crudities".[114]

With this distinction between epistemology and ontology, Pringle Pattison was able on the one hand to identify with the metaphysical idealists and yet maintain that knowledge is by its very nature personal. The following two quotations sum up his

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[110] "Andrew Seth Pringle Pattison" in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford Univesity Press, 2004), 111-112.

[111] A. Seth "Psychology, Epistemology and Metaphysics" *The Philosophical Revue*, 1892, Vol. 1, No. 2, 129-145; and A. Seth "The Problem of Epistemology" *The Philosophical Revue,* 1892, Vol. 1, No. 5, 504-517.

[112] *Philosophical Revue*, Volume 1. No. 2, 144.

[113] *Philosophical Revue*, Voume 1. No.2, 145.

[114] *Philosophical Revue*, Volume 1. No. 2, 145.

distinction between the epistemological individuality and ontological identity in Divine Being.

> Knowledge means nothing if it does not mean the relation of two factors, knowledge *of* an object *by* a subject.[115]

> The universe is once for all a whole and the external world as the Hegelians put it, is essentially related to intelligence, in other words it is not a brute fact existing outside the sweep of divine life and its intelligent ends. In all this I most heartily agree with the neo-Hegelians.[116]

When, therefore, in the concluding chapter of the *Idea of God*, Pringle Pattison reflects on what personal idealism means for divine-human relationships, he provides a theology of both intimacy and freedom. He compares the creation of the soul "not to the manufacture of an article, which remains throughout something separate from its maker" but, rather, to "the addition of a child to a family". It is a strong image of identity and belonging.

> But there is something more intimate still; for its filaments which unite the finite spirit to its creative source are never severed.[117]

And, as in the realm of knowledge, the relational aspect is not lost.

> The Productive Reason remains at once the sustaining element of the dependent life, and the living content, continually offering itself to the soul which it has awakened to knowledge and the quest of itself.[118]

Having committed himself to the personal nature of the divine-human relationship, Pringle Pattison makes several critical adjustments to theology. He abandons the traditional concept of Omnipotence. He argues that the "real omnipotence" is "atoning love"; and God is "no far off theological mystery", but is found "in the very texture of our human experience".[119] He concludes, the theological interpretation of the Spirit as the third person within "the inner constitution of a transcendent

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[115] *Philosophical Revue*, Volume 1, No 5, 513.

[116] *Philosophical Revue*, Volume 1. No 2, 143.

[117] *Idea of God*,255.

[118] *Idea of God*, 255.

[119] *Idea of God*, 417.

Godhead" is fundamentally misplaced. For him, the "doctrine of the Spirit" is the "profoundest, and therefore, the most intelligible attempt to express the indwelling of God in man".[120] In his theology of the Spirit, Pringle Pattison is far removed from Trinitarian orthodoxy; yet, in his theology of the Spirit's working, his views are perfectly at home in the mystery of grace.

2.2.1 Pringle Pattison and Oman

In Pringle Pattison's personal idealism and Oman's personalist theology, there is obviously a mutual emphasis on personality. However, there are differences. Generally, Oman considered that Pringle Pattison leaned too much towards the nineteenth century understanding of "individuality" at the expense of Kant's more robust concept of the "individual". It was Pringle Pattison's contention that what German idealists had done was "to enlarge and complete Kant's conception of intrinsic value by making it include all the higher reaches of human experience".[121] He regarded this as a good thing. For Oman this broadening of personality compromised its autonomy and self-determining character. He expressed his disagreement in *The Natural and the Supernatural.*

> But what Prof. Pringle Pattison thinks success was rightly achieved by discarding the eighteenth century framework of the Kantian scheme, which is what I call the question of the individual: my contention, on the contrary, is that the essential weakness and failure of all Romanticist philosophies was in taking the easy road and over looking it.[122]

Perhaps Oman may be characterised as a "hard" personalist in comparison to Pringle Pattison's "softer" variety. In this emphasis on autonomy and self-determination Oman is much closer to Henry Calderwood than to Pringle Pattison. It was Oman's view that Pringle Pattison, though a critic of neo-Hegelianism, continued to think within essentially Hegelian horizons. Reviewing the *Idea of God*, he comments:

> Pringle Pattison has not adequately settled his account with Hegelianism and relies more on mere "organic unity" for solving

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[120] *Idea of God*, 410.

[121] *Idea of God*, 38.

[122] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, Appendix B, Kant and Hegel, 475.

> problems like perception and the moral ideal, than his own view of the individual justifies.[123]

This is a valid point. In terms of theology, however, there were gains in neo-Hegelianism. It could accommodate an appreciation of spiritual presence and sacramental realism. Because Pringle Pattison allowed for an ontological identity between the finite spirit and its creative source, he was much more creative than Oman with his doctrine of the Holy Spirit. His philosophy was compatible with the New Testament focus on "indwelling"[124] and he did not regard this as a violation of personality. If the Divine relationship is – as he characterises it – "*the existence of one in the other and through the other*",[125] then grace can be experienced *in* us. Consequently, the Spirit and sacraments can be appropriated in more than a relational way.[126] Divine presence does not stop at the boundary of self-directing, self-legislating, self-conscious personality. The mystery of the Spirit transcends Kantian categories.

In contrast, Oman's theology both of the Spirit and the Sacraments is entirely relational and bereft of immanence. Nevertheless, one could argue that Oman, in making human autonomy sacrosanct, is a prophet of a more radical theology. For Oman, the experience of freedom is the experience of God; in this respect, he anticipated a more secular spirituality.

Summary

This comparison of Oman and Pringle Pattison has highlighted fundamental differences. The latter sought a *via media* with idealism through the distinction between ontological identity and epistemological difference. It was a distinction aimed at salvaging personality from being an "adjective" of the absolute.[127] This

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[123] John Oman, Review of Andrew Seth Pringle Pattison, *The Idea of God in the light of Recent Philosophy The Journal of Theological Studies,* 19 (January and April 1917), 279.

[124] For example, Ephesians, 3: 16-17; or Romans, 8: 11-12.

[125] *Idea of God*, 254. (Italics in text)

[126] Oman's exclusively relational understanding of grace is criticised by Helen Oppenheimer in *Incarnation and Immanence* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), 44; 46-7.

[127] Generally Pringle Pattison has not been credited with success in his venture. Mulder comments that he has been charged with "instability and inconsistency, or simple lack of clarity" though in Mulder's

distinction was helpful to a theology of the Holy Spirit and the Sacraments. God in us, as well as with us, is a concept that is common to the New Testament as it is to idealism. Oman, however, is uncompromising on the primacy of human autonomy and a strictly relational ontology. In this emphasis Oman shows more indebtedness to the dualism of his Scottish realist roots than to personal idealism.

Regardless of these differences in relation to metaphysics, Oman and Pringle Pattison share a theology of God as love, known and mediated through human experience. In his concluding Gifford Lecture, the latter's final comment is: "the real omnipotence of atoning love" is "no far-off theological mystery but, God be thanked, the very texture of our human experience".[128] Oman, at one level, would have said, Amen! God is in the texture of human experience. However, for Oman that can be only the tip of the iceberg. His conviction with regard to transcendence made him irreconcilable to a theology of a purely immanent God.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has set Oman in the context of Scottish philosophy. It was a landscape where philosophy and religion complemented each other intellectually. That Oman's teachers of philosophy in Edinburgh, Henry Calderwood and Campbell Fraser, were ministers of the United Presbyterian Church and Free Church respectively, is emblematic of the close relationship between the two disciplines. This was an environment well suited to the teenager from Orkney who brought to philosophical studies a strong religious sensibility. Orkney had given Oman a sense of the numinous, an awareness of personality and a perception that freedom and faith are complementary. Through his reading of philosophy and through the impact of his teachers –who were substantial thinkers in their own right – Oman's native religious instincts found clarification and expansion.

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opinion he was a "subtle and sensitive philosopher." *Dictionary of Nineteenth Century British Philosophy*, 927.

[128] *Idea of God*, 417

Root and branch is probably an appropriate metaphor for Oman's relationship to Scottish philosophy. Oman's main theological themes bear the hallmarks of his philosophical antecedents: Calderwood's definition of personality, Fraser's spiritual universe, personal and both natural and supernatural. Veitch visited questions of poetry and epistemology, mystical awareness and the human sense of the sacred. It is likely that Oman would have read Veitch's monographs; though, unfortunately, he makes no reference to them. In time to come, Oman's philosophical and religious reflections would have a native complexion. Of course, his inquiring spirit and critical acumen would discover new, but similar, lines of thought European thinkers, in Windelband and Otto.

The other half of the metaphor, branches, is descriptive of Oman's relation to Scottish philosophy in the early twentieth century. The period immediately after the 1st World War gave birth to a broad interest in personalism. Pringle Pattison was the pioneer of personal idealism; a branch that had in it something of the soil of the older realism as well as the sap of Hegelianism. Oman, in his theological personalism, was closer to the subjective idealism of Fraser: both acknowledged their indebtedness to Berkeley. Sorley, too, described himself as an idealist of the "Berkeleyan point of view" because individual minds discovering and realising values are, he believed, the first clue to the nature of reality and value. Oman shared with Sorley a desire to keep personality distinct, free and in a gracious relationship to God. Yet, Oman's thought transcended the ethical Idealism of Sorley in his interest in the phenomenology of religion: in the holy, the sacred and aesthetics. With regard to Pringle Pattison, Oman felt that, with his emphasis on immanence and the "organic" nature of reality, his thought was too much within Hegelian ambience. However, in his strict adherence to relationship and transcendence, Oman was unable to accommodate the New Testament promise of "indwelling" of the Spirit. This is a limiting factor in Oman's theology and it emerges again in his antipathy to mysticism and in his sacramental theology.[129]

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[129] See Chapter Four 4.1 and Chapter Six, 5.3

The continuity that Oman exhibits in relation to his teachers and contemporaries does not, however, take away from his stubborn individualism. Whilst Oman may have found human experience clarified and expanded by his philosophical studies, he never sought, or succumbed to, complete intellectual systematisation. Experience, for Oman, is always greater than even the most satisfying explanations. For this reason he escapes the accusation of optimistic liberalism. Oman was ever alert to the bewildering clouds that can suddenly appear on the horizon and to the half light that illumines but does not give transparency; for him, these existential ambiguities are occasions for faith rather than shallow certainty. Human experience as the ground of theology cannot but make for reserve and forbid conclusion. Oman, accordingly, leaves the reader with a theology of hard realism and a liberalism that is always a work in progress.

Any appraisal of Oman, however, is incomplete without consideration of his extensive knowledge of European philosophy and theology. In keeping with the Scottish educational tradition, Oman studied in Europe and engaged with the great European intellectual traditions, namely the Reformation, the Enlightenment and nineteenth century romanticism. This European dimension to Oman's thought is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Three

Oman and European Thought

Sources

The sources for tracing Oman's engagement with European thinking are relatively good. In 1893, when a minister in Alnwick, he translated Schleiermacher's *Reden über die Religion*, together with a biographical introduction of fifty-eight pages and critical notes to the text.[1] This work shows Oman's early, and not uncritical, appreciation of Schleiermacher. In addition, his 1906 publication, *Faith and Freedom,* displays a wide knowledge of European theology and philosophy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Lectures, in outline, were given at Westminster College in 1904 and later delivered as the Kerr Lectures in the Glasgow College of the United Free Church. In fact, the lecture themes had an earlier origin in Oman's D. Phil dissertation, presented to the University of Edinburgh in 1884, which was entitled: *Rationalism and Romanticism: a study of Kant's "Religion within the limits of reason alone" and Schleiermacher's "Speeches on Religion".*[2] These early writings are an important archive, enabling the reader to observe Oman's interaction with European intellectual traditions from the Reformation through to the Enlightenment and Romantic eras.[3] This chapter, therefore, looks at Oman's dialogue with this broad sweep of European intellectual history, beginning with the movement that Oman believed gave birth to modernity: the Reformation.

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[1] John Oman, *On Religion: Speeches to its cultured despisers by Friedrich Schleiermacher translated with introduction* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench. Trübner & Co. Ltd.,1893).

[2] John Wood Oman, *Rationalism and Romanticism: a study of Kant's "Religion within the limits of reason alone" and Schleiermacher's "Speeches on Religion"* Unpublished Thesis, Special Collections, Section 1, University of Edinburgh Library.

[3] As noted in the previous chapter, Oman's interest in bibliographical detail wanes in his later work. In *The Natural and the Supernatural* he comments "what I might claim as my own from what is due to the suggestions of others would at this time of day be a hopeless task." *The Natural and the Supernatural*, Preface, vi.

Themes in outline

The chapter will follow the chronology of the Kerr Lectures. Oman traces the roots of the conflict between faith and freedom to the Reformation. The first section will examine Luther's theology of Christian freedom. For Oman, it is the *sine qua non* for understanding not only Reformation history, but subsequent historical developments. The freedom gained at the Reformation represented a fundamental decoupling of religion from its institutional expression. The next two hundred years were, in effect, a philosophical and theological extension of Luther's principle.

Section two turns to the Catholic Reformation. Oman's interaction with the thinking of the Catholic Reformation is a totally unexplored area of his thought. Yet, it is the second of his lectures. He could have passed it by and moved on to the Enlightenment. But, in fact, Oman saw the Catholic response to Luther's radical freedom as emblematic of what has been perennial; namely, churches have sought a halting place between freedom and authority. Oman felt that the resulting compromises offer no ultimate resolution of the issues; however, he shows appreciation of Jansenism and the ideas of Pascal.

Section three surveys how Oman moves the discussion forward to the Enlightenment and the Romantic era. Oman begins by highlighting the significance of Butler. It was Butler who corrected the deist isolation of rationality from the totality of experience by linking reason to conscience. In that respect, Butler was a forerunner of Kant. Oman expresses warm appreciation of Kant's doctrine of autonomy from which there can be no going back. However, Kant's religion within the realm of "reason alone" suffers from the lack of anything to warm the heart; it cries out for nurture, love and grace. Oman posits a personal, loving environment which is not a threat to the autonomy Kant did so much to prioritise; rather, it nurtures and enhances the freedom Kant prized. The germ of Oman's later *Grace and Personality* is found in his reflections on Kant's moral religion and its weakness.

Section four proceeds to the Romantic period, which Oman felt was a nineteenth century reaction to the emphasis on reason and autonomy, characteristic of the eighteenth century. The idea of humanity as part of a cosmic drama and creation as the work of a divine artist found expression in philosophy and religion, as well as in

the whole artistic spirit of the age. Oman places Hegel and Schleiermacher in this context, appreciating the insights of both, yet feeling that they tipped the balance away from the personal freedom which Luther had discovered and Kant had championed. Hegel left a legacy that was to take many twists and turns, but always encompassing the individual within a larger whole. Oman remained committed to the freedom of persons in an environment that nurtures such freedom. The tenets of *The Natural and the Supernatural* exist in embryo in Oman's discussions of the Enlightenment and the Romantic era.

Section five is a concluding review of the impact of European thought upon Oman's theological perspective. By the time Oman comes to write *The Natural and the Supernatural* in 1931, his thought having travelled by way of *Grace and Personality* and *Vision and Authority*, has a settled appearance in the mode of personal theism, or theistic personalism. It was a philosophy of religion that was shaped on the one hand by Oman's background in Scottish philosophy and by the depth of his engagement with European intellectual traditions. Oman stood in a long tradition of being a Scottish and a European thinker.

1 The Reformation

Oman regarded the Reformation as being a movement that set the intellectual agenda for the succeeding centuries. The central issue, he believed, was freedom and its relation to faith. The quest for freedom left no aspect of life untouched: religious, social or political. In his opening Kerr Lecture, it is plain that Oman regarded Luther's pamphlet, *Concerning a Christian's Freedom,* as the seminal tract of the Reformation. It was freedom as a spiritual value, rather than practical issues of Church reform, which inspired and determined revolutionary fervour of the age. Of Luther's significance, Oman wrote:

> Of the religious life of the Reformation, which was far in advance of its method, the greatest exposition is Luther's work before referred to, *Concerning a Christian's Freedom.*[4]

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[4] *Faith and Freedom*, 31.

Luther's two key propositions, that a Christian is perfectly free and lord of all, whilst perfectly a dutiful servant of all,[5] set freedom at the heart of the religious life. The radical implication was that faith is not a restriction placed upon freedom, nor is love a burdensome addition to it. Rather, faith and love are the partners of freedom, when freedom is understood as fellowship with God. Accordingly, loving service is a free outworking of divine friendship, not a prerequisite for it. To be a Christian, therefore, is to travel lightly, in the true freedom of faith; or, as Oman summarizes it, "to be a Christian, to be justified, and to be free, all mean the same thing".[6] In this concept of faith, minimalist with regard to creed and existentialist in character, Oman believed there is a revolutionary understanding of the religious life. For example, if freedom is at the heart of faith, and faith the author of freedom, is there any necessary connection to "externals" of religion: ceremonies, structures and organisation? Pushing the question to its limits: can religion be free from the authority and control of the Church? Oman believed an affirmative answer is the logic of Luther's position. Religion can and should be free from religious "authorities," both pontifical and confessional. Whether Luther would ever have envisaged Oman's radical trajectory is another question. However, Oman believed that Luther had raised questions that carried through to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, the Reformation had "abundantly raised questions concerning freedom that have never ceased to be asked ever since".[7]

1.1 Decoupling religion and institutions

Oman argues that there has always been a tension between the Church as an organisation and spiritual reality. It is his view that at no point in Christian history have they ever been synonymous. The medieval Church came closest to absorbing one into the other.

> Yet the distinction was there, and the true claim of the Church was never in her great organisation or her completed creed, but in the

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[5] "The Freedom of a Christian" in Harold J. Grimm and Helmut T. Lehmann, edited, *Luther's Works,* Volume 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 333-377.

[6] *Faith and Freedaom*, 31.

[7] *Faith and Freedom*, 13.

> heroism which made men not count their lives dear to them that they might win the peoples from idolatry and barbarism, in the beautiful ideal of woman hood created anew in Jesus Christ, in the piety that delivered from the old pagan hardness of feeling and gave a new meaning to commonest human relationships and humblest duties, in the tenderness which made men succourers (sic) of the sick and the outcast, in the humanity which made them accept poverty to be brethren of the poor and emancipators of the slave, and in the humility which made them pioneers of all progress through the dignity they gave to labour by engaging themselves in menial toils.[8]

This marathon sentence is a good summary of Oman's polemic against the identification of Christian living with ecclesiastical organisation. For Oman, the relation of religion to structure is contingent and ever changing; indeed, it is the spirit of Christianity that sanctifies the institution and not vice versa. Oman writes:

> Christianity sanctified the organisation with which it was connected, but could never entirely be indentified with it, and there was always the possibility that some day the two might stand over against each other in emphatic contrast.[9]

With the Reformation the day of independence for religion dawned, bringing into sharp relief the impossibility of any organised structure containing, or constraining, the human response to God. The Reformation was fundamentally a paradigm shift, marking the arrival of a new religious sensibility. It was the beginning of modernity, or what Oman called "Modern Time". The freedom of faith, as articulated by the doctrine of justification by faith alone, cut religion loose from its medieval anchorage; and it would, thereafter, find its meaning and relevance in the brave new world of freedom and autonomy.

> Beyond question the determining event was the Reformation, for it alone set up the distinction which ended the Middle Ages and created the Modern Time – the distinction between religion and the Church. This was the ultimate meaning of its insistence on justification by faith alone and not by doctrines or rites of the church.[10]

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[8] *Faith and Freedom*, 9.

[9] *Faith and Freedom*, 9.

[10] *Faith and Freedom*, 6.

That the inherent distinction between religion and Church should emerge at the time it did, Oman ascribed to historical factors. Travel and the revival of learning in the period of the renaissance were one such factor. In an expanding world, geographically as well as intellectually, "any visible organisation seemed of smaller significance".[11] In the words of Kipling: "the foot of travel let out the stirrup holes of belief".[12] Commerce was also a factor in this widening of horizons.

> Commerce went with travel and involved intercourse with men of other faiths which made it less easy to believe that God had limited his grace to one institution. And the same effect was produced by the unveiled glory of ancient literature. [13]

Perhaps, most significantly, developments in science changed fundamentally the view of the universe and its laws; and it left in ruins the physical, as well as metaphysical, assumptions of the medieval Church. In the words of Leibnitz: "God was robbed of some of His most excellent attributes."[14] The result was an all encompassing naturalism.

> Heaven is no longer over our heads nor hell beneath our feet, and the earth which once seemed God's only care is dust "less than nothing" amidst myriad worlds. Nor has ecclesiastical authority succeeded better in other spheres of science. Geology has refused to remain stretched on the "Procrustean bed of the Pentateuch." No fulmination has availed against the idea of evolution. In medicine, once the Church's special province, evil spirits have succumbed to bacteria; and in meteorology the very bells baptised to scare the demons of the air are protected by the heretical lightning rod.[15]

In the meantime, the Church fought a rearguard action that was, in effect, to be of no avail. As she "perfected her imperial claim", the "ecclesiastical authorities were slowly driven backwards contesting every foot of the retreat, their carnal weapons growing sharper as their arguments grew weaker".[16] In this manner, Oman outlines a

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[11] *Faith and Freedom*,10.

[12] *Faith and Freedom*,10.

[13] *Faith and Freedom*,11.

[14] *Faith and Freedom*,12.

[15] *Faith and Freedom*,12.

[16] *Faith and Freedom*,11.

bleak picture of ecclesiastical impotence in the face of ever increasing knowledge and ever widening freedom. However, he believed, these changes were prophetic of a new order to come; an order built on freedom as the friend of faith, and on faith as the guardian of freedom.

> More and more, it has become plain that freedom is the fundamentally spiritual idea, and that practically it can only be maintained as a spiritual idea.[17]

The rest of his Kerr Lectures are a delineation of this "spiritual idea". In his last book, *Honest Religion,* Oman reiterates: "we need the kind of freedom that makes us indomitable".[18] Indomitable freedom, however, as Oman was ever eager to point out, comes not as an agent of ease, but with winnowing power.

1.2 Uniting freedom and faith

The existential reality of freedom evoked fear as well as joy in the minds of Protestant theologians. Thus, the spiritual ideal of freedom "as the only ultimate basis of a true faith"[19] would be a long time in realisation. This, thought Oman, should not surprise us, especially "when we remember how long the Christian world had relied upon external guidance which it had considered to be infallible".[20] Besides, freedom is always "at the mercy of wickedness and folly";[21] and, it was almost inevitable that the reformers began with "a deep sense of its overwhelming burden".[22] Several things followed.

First, the earliest effect of freedom was the doctrine of the bondage of the will. And, though this development "might seem contrary to reason", it was not, Oman thinks, an unreasoning response. Freedom is a terrifying reality; and, when its existential depths are plumbed, human beings will always seek relief from it. Indeed,

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[17] *Faith and Freedom*, 25.

[18] *Honest Religion*, 85.

[19] *Faith and Freedom*, 14.

[20] *Faith and Freedom*, 15.

[21] *Faith and Freedom*, 15.

[22] *Faith and Freedom*, 15.

> ..this will never be strange to one who stands under the stars and thinks of infinity and eternity, and realises that God called him to direct his course in the midst of this terrible vastness.[23]

It was, therefore, "to lighten the burden" that Luther in his doctrine of the bondage of the will, and Calvin in his doctrine of predestination, promised relief from the frightening responsibilities that freedom enjoins. Accordingly, people in Reformation lands were able to find, in God's determining will and sovereign grace, the security once found in the Church. For Oman, this turn away from freedom to divine determinism was the fruit of a deeply religious instinct because experience teaches that "it is a perilous undertaking to walk alone" and freedom is "futile" apart from God.[24] However, whilst the exigencies of the time drove reformers in the direction of enslavement of the will, Oman believed that "it grows ever clearer that the denial of man's share is no solution, but rather the abandonment of the problem". [25] The "share" which Oman has in mind is that which belongs to personality. It was, Oman believed, that Divine sovereignty and human freedom find their resolution. Such a resolution, however, was not possible within the traditional theological categories of omnipotence and omniscience. A solution would have to wait for the inter-personal categories of the twentieth century.[26]

Secondly, having given freedom wholly over to God, the Reformers sought a safe repository for faith, not as in the middle ages in the Church, but in correct doctrine and holy discipline. Historically, the hallmark of reformed churches has been adherence to the primacy of the scriptures, a confessional understanding of faith and

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[23] *Faith and Freedom*, 15.. One could argue that the turn to totalitarianism in Europe in the 1930s is another example of a flight from freedom conceived nihilistically; and, similarly, consumer capitalism poses a like danger today.

[24] *Faith and Freedom*,14.

[25] *Faith and Freedom*,15.

[26] As Hendrikus Berkhof points out, the thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries didn't have the personal categories to resolve the issues freedom and determinism, Divine sovereignty and Free will. The biblical concept of grace, as relationship, is distorted when forced into a subject-object schema. However, within intra-subjective categories, the personal nature of grace can be retrieved. Berkhof regards Oman's contribution to the subject of grace as "classical". He writes: "An extensive treatment of the reciprocal relationship of God's activity and ours is given in the (in a sense classical) work *Grace and Personality* (1917) of the English Reformed theologian John Oman." Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the study of faith* translated Sierd Woudstra revised edition (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, Publishing Company), 68.

congregational discipline. These, in Oman's estimation, were an attempt – again driven by the circumstances of the time – to keep freedom within manageable bounds.

> Amid turmoil which arose from the half liberty of imperfect men, even Luther was not always loyal to his high ideal, and Protestantism turned generally to a faith easier to teach and an order easier to enforce. It set up a new school of correct doctrine, made faith the acceptance of its system and rested order on the old type of submission.[27]

Delivered to the United Free Church in 1906 this evaluation of the Reformation heritage must have been challenging to those listening. The era of "correct doctrine" in Scottish Protestantism ended with the heresy trials of the nineteenth century. But, at the time of Oman's lectures, there would still have been a strong belief in doctrine as fundamental to Christian faith. Oman's strictures read as an indictment of confessional churches. However, he takes the edge off his criticism with an historical perspective. Though the needs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries meant that churches sought security for faith in sound doctrine, the essential vision of freedom as the true friend of faith was not lost.

> Yet in the darkest days there was a difference. It was never quite forgotten that Luther's conception of freedom of the children of God was the only ultimate basis of a true faith and a stable order.[28]

Thirdly, the magisterial aspect of the Reformation which led to the establishment of national churches was also, for Oman, a double-sided development. The move towards national churches in Europe was too widespread to ascribe it to mere political expediency. "An arrangement so general cannot be fully explained either by accident or human devices."[29] The positive side of the establishment of national churches was to extend the idea of the "sacredness of the whole of life".[30] Again, this is an example, in Oman's view, that religion transcends mere ecclesiastical

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[27] *Faith and Freedom*,14.

[28] *Faith and Freedom*,14.

[29] *Faith and Freedom*,17.

[30] *Faith and Freedom*, 17.

boundaries. However, he is equally critical of the subjection of religion to state interference, perhaps with his Orkney folk memory in mind.[31]

> The defect of the method is sufficiently apparent. The Church has ever since been exposed to becoming the plaything of worldly politics, and the method of religious freedom has been corrupted by the interference of civil constraint.[32]

In any event, Oman saw the establishment of national churches as a modest step towards "an extension of the scope of religion" and correspondingly a curtailment of "the previous division between the State and a foreign dominion under the name of the Church".[33] It was prophetic, he believed, of a better dispensation to come. The gain in the establishment of national churches in Reformation Europe lay mainly in the potential for a fuller realisation of spiritual freedom because "a freer system in a freer society should not only safeguard but carry forward".[34] The idea of a national church was for Oman, therefore, provisional and prophetic of a less institutional fellowship of faith that would evolve: a fellowship where freedom and faith were more obviously at one.

Summary

As an interpreter of the Reformation, Oman's primary interest is theological. The Reformation set the theological agenda for the centuries to follow; indeed, it marked the beginning of modernity. Oman's essential argument is that the Reformation was about the freeing of religion from the authority of the Church. It was the spiritual root of Luther's break with medieval Christendom. If the Church is no longer the guarantor of salvation, and if the faith of the individual is the essential link to God, the position of the institutions becomes problematic.

On the other hand, Oman was wary of theological abstraction and we see a lively interest in the historical factors. The traumatic events of the sixteenth century had

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[31] For example: the incident at Orphir where troops were used by the Established Church to force a minister upon a parish. See Chapter One.

[32] *Faith and Freedom*, 17.

[33] *Faith and Freedom*,18.

[34] *Faith and Freedom*,18.

roots in the Renaissance. Travel, science and the discovery of ancient learning all had a part to play in marginalisation of institutional Christianity and in the quest for great freedom. Freedom proved an unruly idea. In consequence, the history of the sixteenth century is one of attempts to manage the dangers posed by freedom to faith and order. Calvin's theology of Predestination and Luther's *Bondage of the Will*, magisterial Reformation and the creation of national churches, confessional theology and the writing of catechisms in Protestant churches were efforts to give freedom structural expression. These were, in Oman's view, both advances and limitations.

Finally, as a postscript, Oman's theological work would profit from being read alongside the wide and varied historiography of the Reformation. Such a reading would highlight how Oman's study is theologically weighted and ideologically driven. It must be remembered, however, that he was not claiming in his Kerr lectures to give an historical account *per se*, but rather to trace the development of the two streams of Reformation thought: freedom and faith.[35]

2 The Catholic Reformation

Oman also addressed the question of freedom in relation to the Catholic tradition. "The hope," he writes, "of maintaining this freedom within the fold of the Catholic Church was not confined to Luther and the Protestants."[36] Accordingly, he devoted the second of his Kerr Lectures to the Catholic responses. The lecture is significantly headed "Jesuitism and Pascal's *Pensées*".

2.1 The Jesuits

With regard to the Jesuits, Oman shows appreciation of the personal, spiritual struggle of the founder of the Society of Jesus.

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[35] A good compliment to Oman's highly theological approach is *The Reformation in Historical Thought.* This work by A. G. Dickens and John Tonkin gives an overview of various historical perspectives. The authors also declare in favour of the traditional view that the key question was that of the authority of Scripture. They write: "like a good many of our predecessors in Reformation historiography we recognize the most basic origins of the Protestant Reformation in the clash between churchly innovation and scriptural authority. The primary aim of the Reformation was to restore the true and ancient face of the Church and to cancel the gratuitous additions imposed on the faith by imaginative theologians, enthusiastic fundraisers and illiterate laymen." A. G. Dickens and John Tonkin, *The Reformation in Historical Thought* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd. 1985), 2.

[36] *Faith and Freedom*, 34.

> Like Luther, Ignatius Loyola passed through a great personal conflict. To Loyola also it seemed if his life had been one continuous course of sin. But he came out of the battle on the other side from Luther[37]

"The other side" was a spirituality that sought freedom in obedience, discipline and through the faith of the Church.

> Salvation was to be achieved by a kind of knight-errantry, with confessions three days long and scourgings (sic) three times a day, and with obedience to the word of order like a solder as the highest duty. Obedience to the human head of the Church occupied exactly the same place with Loyola as faith with the Divine Head with Luther.[38]

Thus, Oman passes from appreciation of Loyola's spiritual struggle to a strongly critical assessment of the Jesuits and their theology. He regarded the Jesuit theology as essentially inimical to the interests of freedom.

> Jesuitism, being called into existence to fight Protestantism, took the radical step of repudiating the whole concept of Christian freedom.[39]

Luther, Oman believed, had rescued freedom from the prison of institutional authority, with the result that freedom could find joy in God alone. The Jesuits, in contrast, gave primacy to the Church in directing the soul's relation to God. And so, with regard to salvation, "we are justified when Christ's righteousness, working through the Church, produces our righteousness".[40] In pastoral theology, freedom was likewise made subject to Church authority. When offering pastoral guidance, the Jesuits sought the widest possible latitude for individual choice, in order that personal freedom could be reconciled with the moral legislation of the Church. The doctrine that evolved was "probabilism". Its chief characteristic was a balance between freedom and obedience, with maximum latitude given in cases where conscience could not conform to Church law.[41] One might call it a "situation ethic"

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[37] *Faith and Freedom*, 35.

[38] *Faith and Freedom*, 35.

[39] *Faith and Freedom*, 35.

[40] *Faith and Freedom*, 36.

[41] With regard to Oman's strongly critical attitude to probabilism, the main point of his criticism is that it sought, he believed, too easy a solution to the problem of guilt. In Jesuit moral teaching, "to make their idea of obedience and freedom work at all, it was necessary to belittle the idea of guilt. To belittle guilt is never a difficult task. ….Religion and the natural man were, therefore, marvellously

within the context of the Church's moral teaching. For Oman, however, this *via media* was an attempt to put the new wine of freedom into the old wines skins of institutional authority. Both the depths of human sinfulness and the heights of Divine grace call for a more radical theology of redemption, so that there can be reconciliation of the soul with God, without Church direction or institutional mediation.

> Moreover, if life is divided between freedom and responsibility, the natural man will always be ready to move the boundaries backwards, and the best way to commend him to the claim of the Church will be to make the sphere of independence as large as possible.[42]

Thus, Oman regarded Jesuit casuistry as corrupting of both morals and faith. Large boundaries will always be more acceptable to the self-righteous than to the saint. And, it is equally the case that the conscience aspiring after truth, the troubled soul in quest of holiness, will be dissatisfied with even the widest moral parameters allowed by ecclesiastical authorities. The gospel is a call, not to minimise sinfulness but to find forgiveness and freedom in the soul's personal relationship with God. A legally construed morality was, for Oman, dangerous, being always liable to hypocrisy. He writes:

> The practical result must be, sooner or later, to erect Pharisaism(sic) in to a system.[43]

In this critique, we see again Oman's dogmatic adherence to what he regarded as central insight of the Reformation, namely, that an essential distinction is to be made between religion and the Church.

> In other words, as definitely as the Reformation set religion above the Church, the Society of Jesus set the Church above religion.[44]

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reconciled, so that Escobar could say with truth that now, for the first time, it was understood how Christ's burden could be easy and his burden light." *Faith and Freedom*, 40. For a modern statement of *Probabilism,* see, *The Modern Catholic Encyclopaedia*, edited Michael Glazier and Monika K. Hellwig (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994).

[42] *Faith and Freedom*, 38.

[43] *Faith and Freedom*, 39.

[44] *Faith and Freedom*, 35.

2.2 The Jansenists

Whereas Oman is strongly critical of the Jesuits, he is, perhaps surprisingly, appreciative of their theological conservative opponents, the Jansenists.[45] The movement which derived its name from Cornelius Jansen (1585-1638), Bishop of Ypres, marked a return to the theology of Augustine. Emphasis was placed on the fall, the eternal plight of human beings in their natural state, the need for the regenerating power of Divine grace and on Divine election. The movement met strong opposition from the Jesuits for whom Jansenist teaching was "Calvinism re-cooked".[46]

For Oman, however, the Jansenists had a real vision of the spiritual importance of freedom. They may not have "attained the freedom depicted by Luther",[47]but they could see that freedom must "reach as high as heaven".[48] Fundamental to the Jansenists was the inner relation of the soul to God. The key conviction expressed by Abbé Saint–Cyran, the leader of the movement at the convent Port-Royal, was that "when God means to deliver the soul, He begins internally".[49] Oman adds that, whereas the Jesuits "believed in salvation by institution, Jansen believed in salvation by regeneration".[50]

Because of Jansenist emphasis on personal devotion, the movement was a significant part of the quest for freedom that the Reformation had triggered. Jansenists challenged the power of the Church and many had to flee to Holland where they became the nucleus of the Old Catholic Church. Jansenist spirituality, though steeped in tradition, caught the mood of the age. It combined a deep pessimism about human nature with a fervent belief in redemption. They "found strange dark things in the heart of man and abundant perplexity and weakness", but they believed that their

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[45] For a summary of "Jansenism" see *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology,* (London: Burns and Oates,1969), 171-174.

[46] *Faith and Freedom*, 46.

[47] *Faith and Freedom*, 49.

[48] *Faith and Freedom*, 49.

[49] *Faith and Freedom*, 49.

[50] *Faith and Freedom*, 49.

freedom was to be found in God, if only they could make "the rule of the Church at once more spiritual and austere".[51] Jansenism, in Oman's reading, did mirror Calvinism. It placed the soul in direct relation to the electing, regenerating grace of God, but it did not fully understand that the sphere of religion is as wide as the sphere of life. Even with this criticism, however, one cannot help being stuck by the affirmative spirit of Oman's concluding evaluation. As an historical movement, Jansenism occupied, Oman argues, "a singular position between Romanism and Protestantism", "always tending to recur" and "which some day may be of vital importance for the Christian Church". And, he adds, "never, except in Jansenism has it received deliberate utterance".[52] One cannot help but feel that Oman recognised in Jansenism something of the spirit of his own Seceder tradition. The Old Catholic movement that emerged from Jansenism placed a strong emphasis on interiority within a firm doctrinal and institutional framework. The Jansenists – like the Lollards before them and the Old Catholics to follow, together with Protestants like the Seceders – combined individual faith with institutional fellowship, but with primacy given to the soul's personal relation to God. This mediating position between spiritual freedom and institutional belonging remains the ground occupied by the Churches born at the Reformation even to-day.

2.3 Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)

The most famous, and to Oman's mind, the most creative Jansenist was Blaise Pascal (1632-1662). Pascal was introduced to a "remarkable band of men known as the Associates of Port Royal"[53] through his sister Jacqueline, a nun in the convent of Port-Royal, near Paris.[54] In relation to Pascal, Oman's writing is at its most generous and appreciative. What attracted Oman to Pascal was the way that he both exemplified the spirituality of the Jansenists and transcended it. Pascal "continued to be a devout son of the Church, with a submission both to her creed and her

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[51] *Faith and Freedom*, 49.

[52] *Faith and Freedom*, 63.

[53] *Faith and Freedom*, 63.

[54] *Sacramentum Mundi*,171.

discipline" and this "was amazing in one so free".[55] Oman ascribes Pascal's freedom to the primacy he gave to "the living experience of the grace of Christ". This, however, was not mediated grace in the institutional or sacramental sense, but rather the grace of mystical relation to Christ.

> ....it is not the Christ of the Church, but the Christ of living faith and of the Gospels, the Christ who is God's answer to the enigma of life.[56]

Again, one can argue – but to a far greater degree than with Jansenism – that in Pascal Oman found a spiritual understanding of faith that was kindred to his own. For neither thinker can God be known abstractly, but only through addressing the conflicts, the contrasts and the dilemmas of human existence. The strength of Pascal's spirituality was that he:

> ….looks at the extremes of wisdom and folly, of evil and good, and he seeks to understand man by means of them.[57]

The wounded depths of humanity are in need of healing, the broken spirit cries out for restoration; and to this human predicament Christ comes as Redeemer. Oman summarises Pascal's description of the human dilemma and its answer in Christ.

> It is not a necessary Being that it profits us to know, but the God who meets our need. This need we know when we know our own sinfulness. God we may know and not our need; our need we may know and not God. But we cannot know God in Christ without knowing God and our own need. This response to our need, this unveiling of man to himself and healing of the wounds laid bare, is the true proof of Christianity.[58]

To cast it in modern terms, it was the existentialist in Pascal that spoke to Oman. For Oman, also, the only God that matters is "God sensible to the heart".[59] In that sensibility, freedom and faith are never put to shame, but rather, come to realisation in life and action.

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[55] *Faith and Freedom*, 68.

[56] *Faith and Freedom*, 79-71.

[57] *Faith and Freedom*, 73.

[58] *Faith and Freedom*, 71.

[59] *Faith and Freedom*, 72.

A second, and related, aspect which appealed to Oman was Pascal's experiential methodology. Oman makes much of Pascal's contrast with Descartes. Descartes' search for certainty led him to the thinking subject and to mathematics as a key to the universe. Oman concedes that Descartes' methodology arose from "an earnest love for truth"; it became the method characteristic of the succeeding centuries.

> To understand the eighteenth century we must never forget that it was the age of mighty triumphs of mathematics in astronomy, the age that culminated in Newton, and that from Descartes, himself a discoverer in this region, onwards, it sought in a mathematical method a guide to all the labyrinth of the universe.[60]

For Oman, however, the strength of Descartes' method was also its limitation. To make "reasoned thought the standard of truth", to restrict knowledge to what can be "built up by rigid deduction" and to place sole trust in the method of mathematics as "a guide to all the labyrinth of the universe" is "nothing short of idolatry".[61] In contrast, Oman found in Pascal a wide empiricism that could trust impressions of the outside world: it did not rely on deduction, or restrict thinking to understanding. Oman quotes approvingly Vinet's opening remark about Pascal's empiricism:

> The ultimate standard is ourselves, but it is ourselves in all our reach, in all that we feel as well as all we think, in all we have attained, as well as in the bare faculty of following a deduction.[62]

It was Pascal's plurality of method that was particularly attractive to Oman. Pascal, though a mathematician and scientist himself, did not believe that science alone could unlock the mysteries of life. There are different kinds of knowledge: none of them complete. As a more recent commentator on Pascal observes:

> One of his deepest objections to the Cartesian method is that it assumes to assume that all real and valid knowledge is of the same kind, that there is only one way to *certainty*, which is that of rational conviction.[63]

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[60] *Faith and Freedom*, 72.

[61] *Faith and Freedom*, 54-55.

[62] *Faith and Freedom*, 61. Oman quotes from Alexandre Rodolphe Vinet, *Études sur Blaise Pascal* 3rd edition (Paris : C. Meyrueis, 1856) 1.

[63] J. R. Broome, *Pascal* (London: Edward Arnald Publishers, 1965),79.

In fact, for Pascal there could be no absolute certainty. Like Montaigne,[64] he believed that "opinion not reason governs the world".[65]Besides, reason being a human activity always bears the marks of human subjectivity and prejudice. In Oman's paraphrase of Pascal:

> Laws of nature doubtless exist, but the corrupt reason has corrupted all…..Reason is duped by feeling, disturbed by ridicule, distracted by trivialities, kept in leading-strings by will, at the mercy of self interest.[66]

It is for these reasons that philosophy, theology and the humanities in general are driven back to the study of human nature. Compared with the abstract methods of science, they have less certainty and more angst; however, their lessons are not for that reason less valuable.

> The proper study of mankind is man, but no study is less popular, for none is less consistent with being at ease.[67]

This spiritual anthropology has many resonances in Oman's later work. The human and the spiritual, the earthly and the heavenly, the natural and the supernatural meet in the human heart. Redemption is the healing of the rift between them. Given the strong line of continuity between these thinkers from such diversity of time and place, perhaps it is not surprising that Oman said of *Pensées,* "no book of modern times bears so distinctly the stamp of spiritual genius". It is a remarkable commendation. Oman found in Pascal a freedom of spirit that could stand outside of ecclesiastical structures with, as it were, a heavenward glance. Like Oman, Pascal did not deny the necessity of structure – but it is shaped by reality and not vice versa. Oman's favourite metaphor to describe Pascal's contribution to the question of faith and freedom is that of the contrast between a citadel and a temple.[68]

> Pascal did not make the defence of Christianity a citadel but a temple. To effect that adequately is the problem, for faith shut up in a citadel

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[64] Michel de Montaigne, 1533-1592, French Renaissance scholar, *The Complete Essays* (London : Penguin Books, 2003).

[65] *Faith and Freedom*, 73.

[66] *Faith and Freedom*, 74.

[67] *Faith and Freedom*, 74.

[68] It is a metaphor borrowed from Vinet, Op cite, 18.

> will always be unhappy and unfruitful, and freedom will always be outside and at enmity.[69]

The Catholic tradition was thus important for Oman, as well as the Reformation traditions; but not in the modern sense of ecumenism. Oman was too critical of any historical pretention to finality, especially of any claim to visible authority. He was too committed to an evolutionary perspective, whereby every historical expression is ever changing to be a believer in institutional unity. As observed throughout this section, Oman's commitments and criticisms were born of a belief that faith, though never completely cut loose from material embodiment, must never rest content with those embodiments or become dependent on them. The rightful place for faith is with freedom in the centre of the soul, in fellowship with God.

Summary

The leaven of freedom affected the dough of every tradition. And the Catholic Reformation was, for Oman, a further illustration of the unruly power unleashed in the sixteenth century. He is critical of Jesuits' attempts to keep freedom within an institutional framework and, correspondingly, appreciative of the Jansenists and Pascal. To Oman, they appreciated the transcendent dimensions of faith and freedom – even whilst they tried to be good servants of the institutional Church. Pascal could rise to "spiritual genius" and his empirical methodology was a corrective to Descartes method of rational deduction. There is more than an admiration for Pascal: his way of doing theology was a forerunner of Oman's own method, perhaps even the inspiration of it. In this section we have seen another side of Oman. He was no

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[69] Faith and Freedom, 77. It is interesting to compare Oman's appreciation of Pascal with a contemporary evaluation by Leszek Kolakowski, Professor of Social Thought at the University of Chicago and Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. Kolakowski writes: "For all his genuine attachment to the Church, Pascal was unable to say to his readers: "in matters of faith (as opposed to dogmas and moral rules), you may safely rely on the Church." The Jesuits knew better. They supplied the flock with what it needed – a comforting knowledge of the route one should take to be saved." Leszek Kolakowski, *God owes us nothing: A Brief Remark on Pascal's Religion and on the spirit of Jansenism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,1995), 197. Oman's affirmation of Pascal, over and against the Jesuits, stands in marked contrast. Consider Kolakowski's final word: Pascal's "was a religion for unhappy people and it was designed to make them more unhappy." Op cite. It is a judgement that Oman would consider singularly blind to the radical faith of the Reformation, and, by implication, of the gospel. And, for Oman, it was part of Pascal's spiritual genius that, as a Catholic, he could envisage the love of God apart from institutional mediation. Both Pascal and Oman were in their own spheres prophetic of a secular spirituality, a spirituality like that illustrated in the parables!

ecumenist but had a catholicity of spirit. The Jansenists and Pascal were, for Oman, evidence that spiritual freedom of the sixteenth century was no sectarian aberration. They illustrate that the freedom discovered at the Reformation, and carried over into the Catholic Reformation, is of significance, and of consequence for the whole Christian world, indeed for all of humanity.

3 Enlightenment

Oman approaches the Enlightenment by way of "English Deism and Butler's Analogy".[70] This is indicative of Oman's conviction that English thought was part of a wider European tradition. His discussion of the thinkers who shaped the thought of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries is wide ranging: from Hobbes to Locke and Butler. For Oman, the weakness of deism was its captivity to the scientific methodology. It was the achievement of Joseph Butler to set the question of faith and freedom in a wider context. Though reason can bear good fruit in the domain of science, in the human sphere the essential link is between freedom and conscience. When freedom is linked with conscience the result may be less sure-footed, but this in itself highlights the spiritual nature of freedom. Indeed, it is factors such as probability, and the provisional nature of knowledge, that make room for faith. For Butler and for Oman it is faith, not rational certainty, that is the guide in relation to ultimate reality.[71] Both regard limitation in knowledge and dependence on faith not negatively but positively. Limitation is the field of our spiritual and moral discipline. However, Oman was unhappy to read the gospel solely as a call to faith and discipline.[72] Butler's emphasis on conscience, timely as it was, needs the good news of the Cross whereby we are crucified to the world and the world to us.[73] In other words, personality needs the nurture of divine love, a love that is distinct from the world and yet the key to life in the world. Butler, for all his creative insight into faith

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[70] *Faith and Freedom*, 81-134.

[71] For Butler's doctrine of probability, see, Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion Natural and Revealed*, 1786, (London: Longman & Co., 1834), Chapter Three.

[72] Oman compares Butler to Pascal in being unable to conceive of, or experience, what one might call an "Abba" experience of God. See below.

[73] Galations Ch. 6 v14.

that transcends rationalism, still fell short of heavenly vision; that is, he did arrive at intuition of a love that is comforting as it is creative, a love that relieves burdens of the world as it empowers the soul to carry them. Butler's theology cried out for a theology of the Cross, for an ontology of love, suffering and redeeming – the love of Christ crucified, dead and buried, and yet alive. Oman concludes:

> To Butler [like Pascal] God always remained somewhat less than a Father, having in Him always something of a household disciplinarian. In this Butler comes short of the glorious liberty of the children of God, very much short of the joyous confidence and security of the children of God.[74]

Despite these misgivings, Oman regarded "English Deism" and Butler's response to it as an important arch in the bridge from the Reformation to modernity. The modern period, proper, begins with the Enlightenment; it is then that the freedom birthed at the Reformation came of age. The early study of Oman's work by Francis George Healey recognises this point. Healey comments:

> As he saw it, the Reformers republished St Paul's teaching that faith in Christ sets a man free to be servant of all….In the eighteenth century a permanent contribution was made to the fuller understanding of freedom. The nineteenth century provided another.[75]

Thus, the Enlightenment and its aftermath was a matter of the continuity, clarification and development.[76] In an historical time frame, the Enlightenment and Romantic periods were the centrepiece of a very large mosaic.

Coming to the Enlightenment itself, the multi-national aspect of the movement, or more accurately movements, is reflected in the names given to it: *Enlightenment, Aufklärung* and *Illuminism.* Stephen Bevans remarks that Oman "never seemed satisfied by any English designation";[77] it is true that no single expression could

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[74] *Faith and Freedom*, 134. Perhaps, Butler's failing is the great failing of much Christian preaching where "ought" stands like a barren tree, with no roots in spiritual reality.

[75] F. G. Healey, *Religion and Reality: The Theology of John Oman* Oliver & Boyd, 1965) 44.

[76] Healey in noting the Reformation point of departure for Oman's discussion contrasts Bevans' more recent study. The latter gives proper emphasis, and illuminating discussion, to Oman's relation to the Enlightenment; but he misses the importance of the Reformation for the origin of Oman's ideas. Stephans Bevans, *John Oman and his Doctrine of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Chapter Three "An Experiential Method," 41-61.

[77] *Doctrine of God*, 132, note 55.

capture the diversity and richness of a revolution that changed European culture so fundamentally. However, Oman himself remarks that the *Enlightenment* is the "simpler and more suggestive" of the terms in use. His own preference would have been for the term *Emancipation.*[78] It was the end of "pupilage" in every sphere of life: intellectual, religious and political. Various influences contributed to it; and, there was a great deal of cross fertilisation. The influence of English Deism passed chiefly into France through Voltaire;[79] and, though a direct connection between Kant's practical reason and Butler's doctrine of conscience cannot be asserted, Oman can say: "it is nearer akin to Kant's thought than anything then existing in the world".[80] It was Kant who was the great figure of the Enlightenment; in Kant, Oman wrote: "the eighteenth century summed up its results, as in no other man".[81]

3.1 Kant and the Individual

In Oman's reading, Kant was "the necessary starting point" for the new generation of thinkers who were to follow him. He writes:

> No man is greater within his own limits than Kant, but the limits of few great men have been so severely set. Yet also belonged to his equipment, for in that wide-spreading, encyclopaedic age, such limitation made for power.[82]

Kant gave central place to the self-determining individual, both in the sphere of knowledge and morality. In epistemology, it is the mind that brings order to sense experience; time and space are the categories by which the mind shapes reality and are forms of perception rather than forms of reality itself. These forms of perception apply to the world of phenomena. In the realm of practical reason, however, human beings access another dimension: the noumenal world of value. In the noumenal world it is the categorical imperative that shapes reality. With the same uniformity as

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[78] *Faith and Freedom*, 147.

[79] *Faith and Freedom*, 141.

[80] *Faith and Freedom*, 161. Oman provides extensive analysis of Joseph Butler's response to Deism in Lecture III, "English Deism and Butler's Analogy", Pages 117-134. Our discussion moves on the Kant, the father figure of the Enlightenment.

[81] *Faith and Freedom*, 169.

[82] *Faith and Freedom*, 170.

the laws of physics in the external world, the universal moral law – abstract, uniform and exact for all individuals – governs the inner realm of intelligible reality. The conscience, if an individual is to be free, must accept no other authority: no heteronymous influence, such as the verdict of other people. Of course, the individual is free either to obey the categorical imperative or to disobey; therefore, the individual stands at a moral crossroads. The freedom and dignity of the individual is a destiny personally determined. Oman admires Kant's achievement and summarises it as follows.

> Freedom is the essence of our personality. To act freely, not as a plaything of impulses, but according to an idea of law which our own reason has laid down for us, is to be a person, not a thing, is to rise to the realm of absolute purposes.[83]

For Oman, the great debt owed to Kant arises from his affirmation of the rights and dignity of the individual. And, though human beings are not created good, through free obedience to the moral law they can become good; by means of what Kant called "moral asceticism", the will free though corrupt can be disciplined. In addition, after the manner of the Lutheran doctrine of justification, God sees the end from the beginning; thus, even in the present, a human being may be regarded as good, though with a long moral road to travel.

> Gradual reformation cannot work the renewal. A revolution is required, a change of mind, a kind of new birth, a new creation, a complete transition from the maxim of self-love to the maxim of holiness. That being accomplished, a man is – so far at least as the principle is concerned – a subject susceptible of good.[84]

But, as Oman observed, Kant's "limits were severely set"; and when it came to understanding religion, this was particularly so. Religion was viewed exclusively through the lens of morality. The sublimation of religious categories into moral ones was so complete in Kant's work, *Religion within the realm of Reason Alone,*[85] that

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[83] *Faith and Freedom*, 176.

[84] *Faith and Freedom*, 182. Oman has in mind the theology of Kant's *Religion within the limits of Reason Alone.*

[85] Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the bounds of mere Reason and other writings*, translated and edited, Allen Wood, George Di Giovanni, with an introduction Robert M. Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

no other conclusion was possible save that morality is "the sum and substance of religion".[86] In effect, Oman remarked, no philosophy of religion was ever in more need of the gospel, especially for a gospel that is more than morality. It was a paradox that Kant "will have no gospel", and yet "no scheme of morals ever stood in more need of one. His yoke is not easy and his burden is not light".[87] Oman's criticisms of Kant, accordingly, are in three directions.

First, Oman finds Kant's understanding of the moral law unsatisfactory. It is too uniform and abstract. Kant's "one rule for all" excludes differences in personality. Therefore, though a champion of the individual, ironically he has no room for individuality. Hence, from the perspective of Kantian morality, differences in individual character can be construed only as defects in obedience. As we shall see, this distinction between the individual and individuality features large when Oman comes to consider Romanticism. At that point, he devotes considerable space to weighing up the respective merits of the Kantian ideal of the individual, in comparison with the concept of creative individuality so important to the Romantic thinkers.

A second and broader criticism that Oman makes is that Kant's attitude to the value of worship, either private or corporate, is wholly negative. For Kant, a truly good man might not pray at all; and, if he does pray, it should be only to ask for conformity to the will of God. In relation to corporate worship, it was Kant's view that ritual and outward ceremonies are premised on the erroneous belief that God is susceptible to praise or persuasion. Worship is at best a distraction, at worst a hurtful moral attitude. Oman finds this parsimonious conception of worship a failure to see that religion must arise above morality and that the purpose of worship is to introduce human beings to "the love that casts out fear". It is love not law that is redemptive; and by love the soul is led to the freedom of the children of God. Oman acknowledges that Kant's moral understanding of religion aims at the same end. However, morality, he believes, has neither a wide enough perspective, nor enough regenerative power to reach religion's true goal of fellowship with God. Even at this

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[86] *Faith and Freedom*, 179.

[87] *Faith and Freedom*, 186.

early stage in his thinking, Oman has in view a concept of grace that would nurture freedom, not hinder it. But such a theology of grace would come a decade later in *Grace and Personality.*

Thirdly, Kant's failure to appreciate the need for religion to transcend morality arose, Oman believed, from his undervaluing of historical religion. For Kant, historical religion is "a useful kind of nursery governess for the true moral religion".[88] However, it is something to be grown out of as we mature to a truly rational, moral faith. To Oman, this was inconsistent given Kant's strong belief in the Kingdom of God. For Kant, the Kingdom of God is a transcendent reality and the goal of historical existence. Should history, therefore, not be of ultimate significance for faith? Is historical existence not the sphere where moral and spiritual character is shaped amidst contingency and ambiguity? It is, surely, "the eternal foundation not of an earthly kingdom but of a heavenly kingdom".[89] In this way, Oman argues, Lessing's impasse between the contingent truths of history and the eternal truths of reason is bridged. The contingent truths *are* the eternal truths: they are by nature personal and existential. Perhaps Oman has the distinction between *geschichte* and *historie* in mind, recognizing that narrative transcends the facts and engagement is necessary to knowledge. He comments:

> Moreover, we have a history which the frivolous cannot know, a history which has no meaning except for those who are seeking to accomplish the victory of freedom in the earth.[90]

Even after we have taken these criticisms on board, Kant remains a strong influence on Oman's thinking. Of particular importance is Kant's emphasis on the dignity and freedom of the individual. This is plain in one of Oman's most eloquent passages. It is a passage where Oman extols the importance of the eighteenth century, as shaped by the philosophy of Kant, for our understanding of human dignity and for universal human rights. It is a passage that would be worthy of quotation in any document affirming human rights. This section ends with the passage in full.

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[88] *Faith and Freedom*, 186.

[89] *Faith and Freedom*, 187.

[90] *Faith and Freedom*, 187.

> To be able to regard all individuals alike and to find man's dignity not in his opulence of nature but in his common humanity, is a fundamental moral and religious requirement. The foundation of all liberty is regard for the individual conscience and for the faith which is truly an expression of personal need. Moreover, this regard for the individual is the only secure foundation for a human society that is to be based on a more stable condition than outward compulsion. The ultimate test for a social order is its regard for the rights and duties of the individual as such. The century, therefore, wrought an immense work for human freedom and ultimately for social security – a work that has been persistently undervalued.[91]

That the League of Nations had not been formed when Oman wrote this – and the United Nations and its *Universal Declaration on Human Rights* was nearly half a century, and two world wars away – must make it a remarkably visionary statement. The genesis of it, of course, is in Kant's moral philosophy.

4 Romanticism

Oman was aware that the term Romanticism has broad parameters and can apply to subject matter as wide as literature, philosophy and theology. In *The Natural and the Supernatural* he acknowledges this diversity and indicates his own particular focus and boundaries.

> The term Romanticism is confusing, not only because it is used with different meanings, but because there is the constant habit of slipping from one meaning into another. In its wider meaning, Romanticsim covers the whole poetic movement of the early nineteenth century; in its narrower, it means a special school of thought of which Goethe was the divinity, Friedrich Schlegel was the high-priest, Hegel was the philosopher, and Schleiermacher the prophet. Here we are dealing with the latter kind of Romanticism especially with its philosophy…..[92]

Similarly, in the Kerr Lectures, it is the philosophical aspect that concerns Oman; and in particular the relation of the individual to individuality. Whereas the distinguishing feature of the eighteenth century was the centrality of the individual, the hallmark of the nineteenth was a preoccupation with individuality. This change of emphasis was in itself a natural outcome of Kant's philosophy; but, on the other

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[91] *Faith and Freedom*, 194

[92] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 161.

hand, it jeopardised all that Kant had achieved. This section will examine this paradoxical feature of Romanticism.

Oman begins with recognition of continuity; it was natural that philosophy should seek a philosophy of the individual that would complete the work that Kant had begun. Kant had been the great guardian of individual freedom and dignity, but he did not make allowance for the variety that is the hallmark of personality. The individual in the Kantian definition was a rather colourless creation. As Oman puts it:

> It enjoined man to be moral, but did not show what he was to be moral about; it asserted the dignity of the individual, but it did not show in what form of individuality this dignity was to display itself; it asserted freedom, but it was freedom in a vacuum not a world.[93]

Therefore, though Kant probed the depths of what it means to be a person, a broader understanding of personality was required. The philosophers of the Romantic era filled the vacuum and Kant's moral philosophy passed through a metamorphosis: changing from a philosophy of the transcendent to a pantheistic philosophy of the world. No longer was there moral asceticism, but an enthusiastic embracing of life in the world. Oman lists the following reasons for this transformation from Kant's moral Idealism to the metaphysical Idealism of the nineteenth century.

First, idealism was a natural complement to Kant's work. Kant had emphasised the function of mind in the creation of knowledge. It was his constructive answer to Hume's scepticism. But the nineteenth century philosophers asked: why does reason have to be as purely functional as the Kantian categories proscribe? Could reason not – as Fichte boldly asserted – "produce the manifold of sense, as well as fashion it into experience"? Was reason not, in fact, as Schelling believed, "the thinking again of God's thoughts because man was made in God's image."? Hegel was heir to all these suggestions and developed them most thoroughly and completely. Consequently, the Romantic era breathed a pantheistic air and freedom sprouted wings and soared to artistic heights. Oman graphically describes the contrast between Kant and his successors.

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[93] *Faith and Freedom*, 196.

> With this conception, freedom could no longer be regarded as mere autonomy, mere self-government, or the task of maintaining it as a mere riding of the marches between God and man and man and man.[94]

On the contrary, freedom adopted the air of "a gorgeous pantheism with its confusion of all vital distinctions and its idea of liberty as mere luxuriance".[95]

Secondly, evolution was also a contributing factor to an expanding sense of individuality. We have already noted that: "what the Law of gravitation was to the eighteenth century the theory of Evolution was to the nineteenth".[96] However, whereas the Darwinian idea of evolution became for some the foundation of materialism; for others the idea of developing spiritual experience was inherent in the evolutionary process. Organic ways of thinking opened up a whole new world of possibility, linking thought with matter, and both with God. For example, Hegel considered the emergence of all things, material and mental, as a natural continuum and a Divine revelation – "the self-unfolding of the Universal Reason". [97] Schleiermacher too, looked upon strife and conflict as part of "an ordered whole".[98] Evolution was a prevailing idea bearing upon a whole range of Romantic sensibilities.

> This conception of restless struggle and a growing individuality in the bosom of a universe that rejoices in the unfolding of all its variety, is the keynote of the new age.[99]

Thirdly, a growing interest in history was a correlate to the idea that the world is a great, growing organism. And, this too enhanced the concept of individuality. The human factor in the course of history took on new importance. The Romantic period saw a great explosion of investigation into the past. "Dead languages were interpreted, buried libraries were dug up, remote centuries were at least dimly

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[94] *Faith and Freedom*, 196.

[95] *Faith and Freedom*, 196.

[96] *Faith and Freedom*, 199.

[97] *Faith and Freedom*, 199.

[98] *Faith and Freedom*, 199.

[99] *Faith and Freedom*, 199.

illuminated".[100] Every form of research tended to become historical; the scientist began where history ended. And, consequently, the scientist,

> ….sought to carry back our knowledge of society and man and living creatures and even the inorganic world to the beginning of things."[101]

Fourthly, pietism also contributed to an understanding of the individuality. Religious awakening had a lasting effect beyond its eighteenth century beginnings. It was a corrective to the prevailing philosophical idea that human beings are merely moral subjects of the Supreme Governor of the Universe. Methodism in Britain, Pietism in Germany and the Great Awakening in America recovered the place of feeling in religion: the ramifications ranged far and wide. Kant himself had grown up in the atmosphere of piety. Schleiermacher was educated by Moravians and remained a pietist "of the highest order".[102] Newman's religious life owed its birth to Evangelicalism. Furthermore, argues Oman, even literary and artistic revival became for "many young spirits like a religion".[103]

> A new sense of freedom flowed in them, freedom of individuality, freedom of luxuriant growth against the gardener's shears.[104]

These varied factors interacted to provide an environment where Kant's philosophy of the individual could expand and take on a cosmic significance. It was as though human creativity had found a whole new spiritual world and the individual was free from the narrow moral construct of Kant's philosophy. Oman acknowledged this sense of continuity, but was alert to its dangers.

And so, to the other side of the paradox: Romanticism threatened all that Kant had achieved on behalf of the individual. This, certainly, is Oman's reading of it. Whilst it was natural that there should be a swing away from the "dry temper of the preceding century", Romanticism's love of individuality was "full of moral and

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[100] *Faith and Freedom*, 200.

[101] *Faith and Freedom*, 200.

[102] *Faith and Freedom*, 203.

[103] *Faith and Freedom*, 203

[104] *Faith and Freedom*, 203.

spiritual danger".[105] It is a revealing comment.[106] Oman's chief complaint against the Romantic celebration of individuality is that it abandoned Kant's basic dualism between the world and transcendent reality. It is divine "Otherness" that allows the space for personal responsibility. "Moral and spiritual danger" arises when the antagonism between the world as it is and the world as it is meant to be is obscured or denied. The freedom that Kant contended for is contingent on a dualism that refuses to indentify the world with God. In fact, the gulf, or the enmity, between the world and God creates the "resistance by which we must climb".[107]

> By starting without this dualism we must end with a denial of all fundamental distinctions, with the repetition of the mystic phrase "all in one," with the great cloud land of pantheism where the shadows of giants carry on a phantom battle of the gods; whereas by starting with this dualism and bearing the burden of it in life, we may end with the high solution of wisdom and love, which after all is the only unity worth finding in the world.[108]

In this comment, from early in his career, Oman was on the side of the moralists rather than the artists. He even says "that the way of freedom and duty often refuses to be artistic".[109] With a forward glance into the history of the first half of the twentieth century, Oman's unease with cultural absorption of Christianity echoes other warnings. For example, in the 1930s it was the strong contention of neo-orthodox theologians that nineteenth century theology had succumbed to culture, with the subsequent loss of the transcendent Word of God. Oman, too, from a different perspective, saw the danger and warned of it. Oman's ground for warning focused, as we have seen, primarily on the freedom and dignity of persons. And, for Oman, the dignity of persons is predicated on an ontological depth to reality that marks a limit to every system: cultural, political or philosophical. That limit also marks the sacred space in which human dignity finds its home. In religious terms,

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[105] *Faith and Freedom*, 194.

[106] Oman's criticism of Romanticism should act as a caution against uncritical identification of Oman as a disciple of Schleiermacher.

[107] *Faith and Freedom*, 207.

[108] *Faith and Freedom*, 207-208.

[109] *Faith and Freedom*, 207-208. in his later reflections in *The Natural and the Supernatural*, Oman gives priority of beauty over morality. See, above, Chapter Two, 2.1.1.

our thoughts are not God's thoughts, neither are his ways our ways.[110] Yet, God is not distant but present to us in our brother and sister;[111] or, as Oman expresses it, human beings are the ultimate symbol of God: "the sacrament of the Divine is humanity".[112] Oman sets against the power of culture an affirmation of the Other, at once *in* our neighbour and *above* all.

4.1 Schleiermacher and Hegel

Oman's critique of Romanticism was as usual nuanced. Stephen Bevans rightly calls him the "reconciler of opposites". Hence, though he is firmly on the side of Kant, he is also aware of the contribution of Romanticism. In a long sentence he describes the positive contribution of the movement he has just so stridently warned about. The sentence is quoted in full.

> This defect in moral strenuousness being acknowledged, the gain of Romanticism, however, ought also to be acknowledged – its recognition of the elements in human nature and in life which had been ignored, its attempt to life in a world and not in a vacuum, its thought of the universe no longer as a great machine of which the main problem was to find the driving wheel, but as a great work of art, the more glorious that it is still in the process of creation, its idea of man's mind no more as a calculating machine, a lathe for turning out logical conclusions, but as a mirror of the universe, a copy in a finite form of Eternal Reason, not a mere faculty of abstractions, but a treasure house of all the variety and individuality of the world.[113]

How, one may ask, can this protean description be reconciled with the earlier criticisms we have encountered? It is a good example of Oman's methodology. He always takes the widest possible angle on a problem and strives to discern both worth and weakness in every intellectual position. It is, indeed, the fruit of making freedom the final hermeneutical principle. If knowledge must function, as Oman believed it does, within an evolutionary cosmology, then there can be no final intellectual, moral or spiritual resting place; nor can there be no road humanly travelled, which doesn't

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[110] Isaiah, 55 v 8.

[111] 1 John, 4 v 12

[112] *Faith and Freedom*, 271.

[113] *Faith and Freedom*, 208.

exhibit both gain and loss. Thus, Oman finds in Romanticism, or, more especially, in the two great figures of Schleiermacher and Hegel, vision and insight of abiding worth.

4.1.1 Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)

Oman's analysis of Schleiermacher's work is extensive, both in his translation and introduction to the *Speeches* and in his Kerr Lectures. The salient point, in Oman's estimation, is that Schleiermacher delivered religion from the rationalism and moralistic tendencies of the eighteenth century. In so doing he gave primary position to individuality and, most importantly, he made the foundation of religion freedom in God. Oman sums up the point of view of the *Speeches* as follows:

> The Infinite is endlessly at work expressing itself in the most multifarious forms, and each individual in being one such expression of the infinite variety. It would almost appear as if, to Schleiermacher's mind, infinity in God derived meaning and significance mainly from individuality in man.
>
> This view of man's freedom, as the right and duty to be himself, went with a different conception of the source of freedom. The creative power in man is not ratiocination, but feeling or intuition. By feeling we have intercourse with reality.[114]

Oman adds that the three editions of the *Speeches*, the first in 1799, the second in 1806 and the third in 1829, show how Scheiermacher's thought progressed. Nevertheless, it was the first edition of *Speeches* that made the "first deep impression".[115] And, "it is Schleiermacher's enduring merit that he insisted that man must be free to be something, and that there is no real freedom except in God".[116]

Thus, in Schleiermacher, Oman found a writer who articulated his own deepest intuitions about the unity of piety and freedom. The quest for freedom that had aggravated the split between religion and unbelief from the Reformation onwards was, to Schleiermacher's mind and to Oman's, a false dichotomy. God rather than being the enemy of freedom is, each believed, its source and guardian. Furthermore,

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[114] *Faith and Freedom*, 216.

[115] *Faith and Freedom*, 210.

[116] *Faith and Freedom*, 237.

Schleiermacher was able to arrive at a conception of freedom in God that avoided the excesses of pantheism. He envisaged the "transaction" between human beings and God in "more personal terms".[117] It was this aspect of Schleiermacher that Oman carried forward most in his own thinking.

However, in spite of Oman's admiration for Schleiermacher, he believed that there was something lost in the transition from Kant's moral emphasis. First, Schleiermacher made his appeal to a cultured elite in order that they could see that religion was not at odds with artistic temperament. This, Oman argues, begs the question as to what Christian freedom is. Is it to be found in culture? Is it, in Oman's pejorative expression, "a mere caste interest"?[118] Should Christian freedom not dignify – as Luther implied – the work of the peasant, or artisan, as much as that of a cultured elite?

> Manifestly there is some mistake. The glorious liberty of the children of God can glorify the basest of tasks, and our spiritual heritage should not be at the mercy of any outward condition, even the means of culture. Man in that case is not free in any right sense of the word. Unless life's final goal is something more independent of circumstances than culture, there can never be true inner freedom. Even such an outward good as entire social justice would wholly over turn at least the present basis of culture.[119]

In this estimation of Schleiermacher, we have both the cautious Oman and the radical Oman. He concedes, even admires, Schleiermacher's vision of freedom in God in which the glory of being human may blossom. At the same time, he fears that the moral value of the individual may be lost if there are no windows from the world of culture to transcendent reality. Human beings grow and develop, not in light of culture, but in the half light of experience. It was the weakness of Schleiermacher and the Romantic writers generally that,

> The interest is so concentrated on individuality that the individual disappears behind it. Man does not stand as he did to the writers of the eighteenth century, with the burden of his freedom on his shoulders,

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[117] *Faith and Freedom*,222.

[118] *Faith and Freedom*, 218.

[119] *Faith and Freedom*, 219.

> distinct both from God and other men, arraigning himself before the tribunal of his own conscience and laying upon himself the burden of his own duty.[120]

Thus, Oman retains a Kantian zeal for duty; and the transcendent point of reference is cardinal. Culture may represent the flowering of freedom, but freedom itself, if it is to live courageously, needs a heavenly vista and rugged independence. Of that, Christ is the great example; and the Lord's Prayer is the essential creed.

4.1.2 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770- 1831)

Hegel doesn't receive the same detailed analysis as Schleiermacher; but, nevertheless, he was not for that considered any less important by Oman. Whereas "Schleiermacher was the great theologian", it was Hegel who was "the great philosopher".[121] Despite personal antagonisms between the two thinkers, Oman regards their intellectual perspectives as essentially compatible. For example, for both "history is the revelation of God".[122] The chaotic and antagonistic elements of history are only such from the point of view of time. They have their reconciliation in God who is beyond all contrasts and opposites. Whilst for Schleiermacher, bad is a necessary part of the good; for Hegel, evil is overcome in the unfolding process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. In relation to sin, for Schleiermacher it "is a restriction of the consciousness of God", for Hegel; "it is in a similar way a matter of limitation not transgression".[123]

The difference, therefore, between the two thinkers is essentially epistemological, and centres on the point of contact between the individual and ultimate reality. With Schleiermacher, reality is known through feeling, or intuition; for Hegel knowledge comes through reason.[124] Also, for Schleiermacher, we cannot know God in an

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[120] *Faith and Freedom*, 236.

[121] *Faith and Freedom*, 208.

[122] *Faith and Freedom*, 245.

[123] *Faith and Freedom*, 246ff

[124] For Kant, of course, the point of contact with the transcendent is moral awareness, or conscience. For Oman, intuition of ultimate reality is inclusive of all faculties – will, feeling and intellect – and religious awareness in that broad sense is the "the really creative element in all knowledge" *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 27. In the same volume, see Chapter Two for discussion of "the seat of religion".

absolute sense but are dependent on faith that follows intuition. However, for Hegel there is a transparency in reason that makes for a univocal relation between human reason and God.

> If the Universal Mind can be interpreted by my mind, the process of thinking must be identical in both. There cannot be two kinds of thought, and hence God is not the highest feeling but the highest thought, the individual reason must be the key to the Universal Reason.[125]

Oman acknowledges the appeal of Hegel's hypothesis. Indeed, it is of "first importance that genuine faith and real freedom can never be in disagreement".[126] However, as one might expect for Oman, the weakness of the whole Hegelian system was the loss of the individual as an independent moral agent.

> God for Hegel is not the System-builder, He is the great System in which everything is right because everything is in its place.[127]

In consequence, personal freedom is lost in process and no longer a work of purpose and endeavour. As Oman graphically puts it, in Hegelianism the individual "registers on the barometer" more than doing anything "to improve the weather".[128]

4.2 The Enlightenment and Romantic legacies

Having pursued the theme of freedom from the Reformation to the Enlightenment and through to the Romantic era, the remainder of the Kerr Lectures was devoted to the legacy of these contrasting though complementary movements. The immediate lectures were entitled, "The Revolution and Newman's *Apologia*"[129] and "The Theory of Development and Baur's *First Three Centuries*".[130] In brief, these

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[125] *Faith and Freedom*, 247.

[126] *Faith and Freedom*, 251.

[127] *Faith and Freedom*, 249.

[128] *Faith and Freedom*, 251.

[129] Oman summarizes Newman's *Apologia*. For a more recent edited, see, John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua: being a history of his religious opinions*, edited with an introduction by Martin J. Svaglic (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). For a contemporary reflection on the reception of Newman in Protestant Britain, see, Erik Sidenvall, *After anti-Catholicism? John Henry Newman and Protestant Britain 1845-1890* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005).

[130] Ferdinand Christian Baur, *The History of the Church of the first three centuries*, third edition, (London: Williams Norgate,1879).

illustrate how the idea of the world as process and development remained prominent in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Oman argues that the Oxford movement and the "higher criticism" of the Tübingen School, though implacable opposites in their conclusions, shared a common *a priori* starting point. They began with a theory of history before beginning the study of history. In their contrasting ways, Newman and Baur were impatient with the slow, irregular, methods of free enquiry; they were too eager for a metaphysic into which the complications of history could be fitted and resolved. In Newman's case it was "various Economics of Dispensations of the Eternal"[131]; in Baur's it was the thesis of primitive Christianity, the antithesis of gentile Christianity and the synthesis of early Catholicism. Oman writes;

> The aim of Baur's theory is to pour the fullness of the perfected idea of Christianity into many vessels, and it seems to describe as much to Paul as to Jesus, but he is too great an historian to be able to conceal the unique greatness of Him who remains the Author of the Faith; nor, although his task is to prove development, can he obscure the fact that nothing ever rises higher than the religion of Jesus.[132]

For Oman, all theories of historical determinism cannot but jeopardise the tasks and opportunities afforded to the free person and exemplified in Christ. There are no "mountain peaks of thought", no overview that can spare humanity the arduous task of exploration. Freedom will always be full of pain and toil as moral options are sifted; and failure is often the result of wrong conclusions being drawn and wrong ways being taken. There is no alternative. The autonomy of the Enlightenment cannot be mortgaged for the illusionary security of a perfect vision, "complete" metaphysic or "final" revelation.[133] For this reason, patience is the pre-requisite of freedom. "We see the need", Oman writes, "of patience, the need of looking at history not as a large scheme, but as a record of toils and struggles of men for faith and freedom, struggles depending on will and character in the final issue."[134] In Oman's thinking, the quest for freedom and the call to freedom may rock the most

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[131] *Faith and Freedom*, 272.

[132] *Faith and Freedom*, 306.

[133] See, Chapter Five where Oman's Christology is predicated on the freedom of Christ and the freedom into which he calls his disciples.

[134] *Faith and Freedom*, 274.

solid foundations. It was the premise of the Enlightenment that all tradition is to be questioned and all knowledge interrogated. For Oman, this is a goal to be prized. Freedom to question, sift and even to bring down the most hallowed citadels of thought can be prized in the security of a love that nurtures, calls, inspires and forgives, the all embracing love that Christians make bold to name as God.[135] This conviction proved to be the *grundprinzip* of all of Oman's subsequent work.

The final of the Kerr lectures, "The theology of experience and Ritschl's *Justification and Reconciliation*", and "Method and Results" take the theme of freedom and faith up to the period contemporary with Oman's writing.[136] These lectures are illuminating too, as Oman moves to the question of freedom and atonement. It is at the Cross where freedom and love meet revealing the depth and interconnection between them. Oman draws upon both British and German theology, showing that the theme of reconciliation pre-occupied theologians as diverse as McLeod Campbell in Scotland to Ritschl in Germany. "English theology" he believed, could never resolve the issue of faith and freedom with the consequence of "all schools falling back in one way or another on the position that truth is what God has authoritatively announced".[137] On the other hand, the world of British theology had "a deep interest in the question of Atonement and its earnest endeavour to make the doctrine convincing to the heart and conscience".[138] Thus, "the greatness of the issue has not been altogether unperceived".[139] With regard to German theology, Oman critically examines the liberal (Hegelian), the confessional (Lutheran High Church) and mediating schools culminating with Ritschl, whom he takes to be a representative of the latter. These theologies, Oman argues, though they all perceived the problem of reconciling faith and freedom, halted between two opinions, never fully realising the priority of freedom over all else. In the end, it is freedom itself that matters; it is the

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[135] 1st John 4:8

[136] Oman's relation to Ritschl will be examined in Chapter Five.

[137] *Faith and Freedom*, 330.

[138] *Faith and Freedom*, 330.

[139] *Faith and Freedom*, 330.

sacrament of the divine in humanity; it is fundamental to the supernatural and to the natural alike. Oman concludes:

> In the present feeble beginnings of man's freedom, nourished tenderly by God's grace, we see the baby's hand that holds the sceptre of this great realm, and we should resent nothing that displays either its vastness or its permanence. Thus in a higher sense than his we realise the force of Hegel's great saying: "the truth of necessity is freedom".[140]

Oman remained ever on the side of freedom against its critics. We must, he argues, "never be impatient of the half done task".[141] That is the nature of the God given reality in which we live. History would have no meaning if the end was known from the beginning. Misery, error and chaos mean that "God is patient enough to let us work out our freedom, that, in the end, He may bind us with the only eternal bond of love".[142] Thus, Oman combined freedom with the idea that the universe subsists in a larger spiritual environment, the supernatural. The supernatural is our spiritual home, that is, a place where freedom and otherness or difference are sacrosanct; and in that reality, the autonomy of the enlightenment and the sense of oneness for which the romantics craved, find, Oman believed, reconciliation.

Summary

In relation to the Enlightenment and the Romantic periods of European culture, Kant was the necessary starting point. It was Kant, Oman believed, who set the agenda for all who followed. At the heart of his moral philosophy were freedom, dignity and individual responsibility. Kant was the thinker who set the ground rules for what it is to be a person. However, Leibnitz's famous saying, that philosophical sects are nearly all right in what they affirm and wrong in what they deny, was pre-eminently true of Kant.[143] Those aspects of personality that are unique to each individual were ignored by Kant in his rigid adherence to the moral law and categorical

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[140] *Faith and Freedom*, 419.

[141] *Faith and Freedom*, 271.

[142] This theme is analysed more closely in Chapter Four.

[143] *Faith and Freedom*, 169.

imperative.[144] Nevertheless, Kant's limitations were compensated for by his great achievement of raising the worth, dignity, freedom and responsibilities of the individual to a new level.

Romanticism, in turn, sought to correct the deficiencies of the eighteenth century, with its strict moral definition of what it means to be a person. Several factors contributed to the rise of romantic sensibilities: Kantian idealism itself, evolution, a renewed sense of history and pietism. However, the gains towards understanding the rich diversity of individuality were not matched by a sustained respect for the individual. This, for Oman, was the great weakness of the nineteenth century emphasis on individuality. He expresses it most strongly as "a moral and spiritual danger". The crux of that danger was the loss of a sense of God's transcendence and the reduction of religion to pantheism. Thus, what personality seemed to gain through the recognition of individuality was imperilled in absorption of the individual in the various determinisms that flowed from the philosophy of Hegel. The latter was the great philosopher of the Romantic era, but his deification of human reason jeopardised human autonomy and, in consequence, the significance of moral struggle, born of freedom and faith, was eclipsed.

Oman, however, saw redeeming factors in Romanticism as well as dangers. This was particularly so with respect to the theology of Schleiermacher. The insight that ultimate freedom is in God – and that piety and freedom are not alien to each other, but mutually edifying – was of lasting significance for theology. Oman regarded this insight as Schleiermacher's greatest contribution. At the same time, the full benefit of Schleiermacher's theology was not realised because his tendency was to identify freedom with its cultural expression: this is to lose freedom in mundane reality. Furthermore, freedom can never be the prerogative of cultured elites, but rather it is realised through the sustaining power of God for the lowliest task.

At the end of Oman's review of religious significance of the Enlightenment and Romantic periods, he traces the continuing relevance of the issue in the late

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[144] Oman makes the distinction between the Kantian moral philosophy of the "Older Intuitional School" and those whole take an evolutionary perspective on conscience. *Natural and Supernatural*, 315.

nineteenth century through to the twentieth. Freedom of persons remained, for Oman, the central question to be addressed in metaphysics and theology.

Concluding remarks

Oman's understanding of the Reformation, Enlightenment and Romantic traditions deserves to be better known. His knowledge of the long European meta-narrative is comprehensive and in English there are no equivalent studies. John Macquarrie's *Twentieth Century Religious Thought,*[145] A.I.C. Heron's, *A Century of Protestant Theology*[146] or Barth's *Nineteenth Century Protestant Thought,*[147] come near with respect to the nineteenth century; but, they do not attempt to reach back to the Reformation, nor do they range so freely across the disciplines of philosophy and theology. James Livingstone's volume, *Modern Christian Thought*,[148] certainly covers a wide terrain, but begins with the Enlightenment. The key difference between Oman and any of the fore-mentioned is that he sets out not simply to give an intellectual history, but to read history through a particular hermeneutical lens. The story of modernity, or, as Oman calls it, the birth of "Modern Time", cannot be separated from the question of freedom. It is the star by which Oman seeks to navigate impasses such as those between freedom and religion, freedom and determinism and the individual and individuality. The test that Oman applies to any particular philosophy is whether it enhances individual freedom and responsibility, or whether it is inimical to it. In the next chapter, the question of the contours of freedom will be examined in detail.

For now, it is noted that for Oman the pearl at great price in the European meta-narrative was freedom as a spiritual value.[149] In that concept, Oman finds a key to

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[145] John Macquarrie, *Twentieth century Religious Thought: the frontiers of philosophy and theology*, 1900-1970 (London: SCM, 1971).

[146] A. I. C.Heron, A Century of Protestant Theology (Guildford and London: Lutterworth Press, 1980).

[147] Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth century: its Background and History* (1952) translated and published (London: SCM, 1972).

[148] James Livingstone, *Modern Christian Thought, Volume 1, The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century* (Minneapolis, 2006).

[149] Oman's theme of freedom as a spiritual value does not stand in isolation in a European context. Oman's recommended textbook, George Galloway's *The Philosophy of Religion*, highlights the

Europe's diversity and chaos, and an understanding of its wars as well as its great synthesising movements. Freedom as a spiritual value – through periods of loss and times of recovery – shapes philosophy, culture and theology. In the midst of the shifting tectonic plates of culture, the affirmation of personal freedom through faith in God is a saving grace. Otherwise, the human spirit is either enchanted by systems of thought and ideologies, or crushed by a hopeless determinism. Freedom has the potential for both chaos and creativity and the human spirit must shape its own destiny. Paradoxically this can be done only through the discovery of, and obedience to God's will. The possibility of failure is always present, and often happens. But still, the enduring hope is that through the apprehension of the love of God, human consciousness can find redemption. In that respect, faith and freedom are complementary gifts of God's parental love.

Although, Oman arrives at a reconciliation of faith and freedom in a way that may be satisfying to liberal sensibility, the charge may be made that his theology of personal freedom is intellectualist. Most people live en-cultured lives and do not have the level, or leisure, of detachment that Oman presupposes. Life for most people is a matter of inherited assumptions – national, cultural, theological. The imperative, therefore, towards a critical examination of values – something that Oman regards as essential to spiritual life – is silent in the experience of the many. The charge of an elitist thrust to his work would have alarmed Oman. His conviction was that God is involved in the detail of *every life* and, consequently, freedom, the gift of God and the task of humanity, is a practical concern, of equal moment to the artisan as to the intellectual. The story of the prodigal son is not amongst the best known of Jesus parables for no reason. It articulates a deep desire in the human condition for both freedom and reconciliation; and in the practical realisation of freedom the artisan might well be first and the philosopher last. The freedom that Oman articulates

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philosophy of personal freedom as a distinctive voice in Europe in the early twentieth century. It was a voice represented, amongst others, by Rudolf Eucken (1846-1926) and Hermann Siebeck (1842-1921). Oman commented in the Preface to *The Natural and the Supernatural* that "of all the *Religionsphilosophien*" he was "inclined to regard" Siebeck's work as" the most profitable". (Preface vi). Again, as in the case of Scottish philosophical influences, it is a pity Oman did not bring Siebeck and others into explicit dialogue. See, Rudolf Eucken, *Christianity and the new idealism: a study in the philosophy of religion to-day*, translated Lucy Judge Gibson and W. R. Boyce Gibson, (London: Harper, 1913); for Hermann Siebeck, *Lehrbuch der Religionsphilosphie* (Frieburg: Mohr, 1893).

intellectually will be understood existentially by the teenager who has runaway from home, the asylum seeker fleeing persecution, the gay person alienated from the Church, or the former fundamentalist alienated from the dogmatic certainties of preacher and sect. It may be argued, therefore, that whilst Oman's reflections on personal freedom issue from a position of privileged intellectual ability, the reality of freedom – its loss, its betrayal, its cost, its joy – is commonplace.

In the overall context of Oman's work, freedom is a bridging theme, connecting diverse phrases of an intellectual journey. From his early life in Orkney, to his study of philosophy in Edinburgh, through to his reading of the formative figures in European thought, freedom is a recurring and unifying principle.

Chapter Four

Freedom in its theological, metaphysical and personal dimensions

Introduction: connecting threads

Chapters one to three noted that two substantial tributaries feed into the stream of Oman's thought – his Scottish experience and his knowledge of European intellectual traditions. We have further observed that, whether in relation to his Orkney cradling in the faith, his Scottish education in philosophy, or his wide reading in European theology, freedom as a personal value is a recurrent theme. In the United Presbyterian Church, with its dissenting roots going back to the Seceders and its liberalisation with respect to Confessional subscription, there was a healthy regard for freedom of conscience which other Presbyterian traditions would in time emulate. In Scottish philosophy, particularly in Edinburgh, where Oman received his undergraduate education, there was a concern for the freedom of persons in metaphysics distinct from absolute idealism. For example, the work of Pringle Pattison was a seminal voice in the development of personal idealism.[1] With regard to European thought, Kant held that freedom, immortality and God are necessary postulates for a theory of morals and Schleiermacher saw piety and freedom as being correlates in religious experience. Intellectually, freedom was in the air that Oman breathed; and, as the previous chapter has shown, freedom was the issue he chose to highlight in his first venture into the arena of public lectures. His Kerr lectures, though encyclopaedic in their compass, had a single focus, namely, the relationship between freedom and faith from Luther to Ritschl. Towards the end of the lectures he concluded:

> Freedom is not merely the fundamental it is the exclusive basis of spiritual belief now left to us.[2]

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[1] *Intending Scotland*, Chapter Two.

[2] *Faith and Freedom*, 401.

Oman's was an unwavering commitment to the idea of freedom. The term itself is significant: freedom as a basis of "spiritual belief". Freedom as a purely secular value, Oman believed, could not be sustained, given the power of the world, the flesh and the devil. But, neither could freedom as a spiritual value survive if the authority of tradition is given preference over personal insight and conviction. There could, Oman believed, be no simple return to an unreconstructed, or dogmatic, creed. Oman considered that all attempts to defend the citadel of faith, by means of bolstering the ancient authorities of Church, scripture and creed, left freedom outside and in alienation. The urgent need, Oman felt, was to find a creative understanding of the relationship between freedom and faith. Thus, Oman pursues the question of freedom – not just down the labyrinth of history, as in the Kerr lectures – but to personal, metaphysical and theological conclusions. This chapter follows Oman on his quest to establish freedom as the ultimate value in the human heart, in the universe and in God.

Themes in outline

Section one traces the creative re-shaping of theology that occurs when personal freedom in a personal universe is placed at the centre of theological thinking. Drawing on a concept of person – which echoes that of his teacher of moral philosophy, Henry Calderwood – and recasting the idea of grace in personal rather than instrumental categories, Oman develops an ontology that is realist, personal and theological. Personal idealism and theological realism merge in Oman's theology of the natural and the supernatural.

Section two looks in more detail at the metaphysical implications of freedom. Oman was not content with a purely existential solution, prizing freedom as a personal attribute in an impersonal world.[3] His *bête noir* was a mechanical universe and this section examines the sophistication of his arguments for a dynamic evolving universe where freedom has an important part to play.

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[3] In this, Oman differs from the tradition stretching from Ritschl to Bultmann that accepted a dualism between a deterministic universe, the sphere of scientific knowledge, and existential freedom, the sphere of faith. For Oman, the whole created order is moving towards freedom in God. See, below, Section Three.

Section three examines the link between Oman's central concept of the personal freedom and his core philosophical-religious concepts of the holy and the sacred. The latter concepts are integral to Oman's mature reflections on the religion. It is by personal response to spiritual environment, to the supernatural, that religious progress is made or loss is incurred. Both the uniqueness of Oman's ideas of the holy and the sacred and criticism of them will be examined.

The fourth section will recapitulate Oman's criticism of mysticism. His main contention was that mysticism is inimical to personality. But, where mysticism fails, prayer enhances; Oman's theology of prayer and his philosophy of personality are complementary. Prayer earths the ideal and transfigures the empirical; in prayer freedom is sanctified, not through being domesticated or having its wings clipped, rather, as it responds to the call of spiritual environment, to the call of God.

The sixth section gives an appraisal of Oman's multidimensional concept of freedom and its uniqueness.

1 Re-shaping theology: personality and the idea of grace

1.1 Concept of personality

Oman's concept of personality was noted in Chapter Two, where the similarity between his definition and that of his teacher, Henry Calderwood was examined. To recap, in his *Hand-book of Moral Philosophy,* Calderwood's understanding of a Person reads:

> Man is self-conscious, intelligent, self determining power – a Person, not merely a living organism, not a mere Thing, Personality involves self-conscious being, self regulated intelligence and self determined activity.[4]

Oman works with essentially the same concept: a moral person is self-determined, according to his own self-direction, in the world of his own self consciousness.[5] However, behind the similarities of terminology, there is a difference of emphasis.

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[4] *Hand-book*, 26.

[5] *Grace and Personality*, 44.

For Calderwood, moral precepts are intuitive and self evident; conscience can err only in application and not in principle. Oman, in contrast, has an evolutionary understanding of how moral personality grows and develops. Human conscience rises above moral maxims and the only ultimate authority in morals is love. Consequently, human beings go through many intermediate steps in the march of moral progress. In his own words: "we, thus, as it were, rise up on the stepping stones of our dead selves to higher things".[6]

This progressive understanding of personality is premised on Oman's understanding of the origin and nature of human freedom. For Oman, human freedom is part of humanity's evolutionary heritage. In *Faith and Freedom* he digresses on this point. *Homo sapiens* stands in the long continuum of evolving life; and, with the arrival of human beings, a unique advance took place on the evolutionary scale. The term *sapiens,* itself, is indicative of the radical break with the past. With the advent of a knowing and willing consciousness, a new gift arrived on the surface of the earth; a gift not yet in its finished form, but with the promise of completion before it. Oman writes: "the possession of freedom draws an absolute distinction between man and the lower animals, relating him in an entirely different way to the world, and, therefore, to God".[7] The "entirely different way" is a significant remark. Human beings are rational creatures, not determined by impulse, but with freedom of choice. Freedom is the essential attribute that both defines what it is to be human and what it is to be spiritual. It is because human beings possess freedom that humanity may be considered sacramental. "The whole world", Oman writes, "is a sacrament of things spiritual"; but, it is a mistake to stop with material symbolism. He continues:

> Nor is the highest way to place the sacrament idea in the material world at all, for its ultimate symbol is man not nature, and the fundamental error is to deny that liberty on which the sacramental importance of man depends.[8]

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[6] "Morals", an unpublished essay in Oman Papers, WT/ 1/12-14.

[7] *Faith and Freedom*, 408.

[8] *Faith and Freedom*, 271.

Freedom may be considered the light of divine presence in humanity. It is both a creaturely acquisition in an evolving universe and a divine gift which establishes conscious fellowship with God. It is embryonic and has the prospect of fuller realisation in the teleology of divine love. "God is patient enough", Oman writes, "to let us work out our freedom, that, in the end, He may bind us by the only eternal bond of love". To picture freedom in this way is a bold theological move; for now, the very thing that was thought inimical to faith, namely freedom, is the source of kinship with, and belonging to, God.

The establishment of human freedom as a spiritual quality is the first link in Oman's argument that personality bridges the gulf between autonomy and faith. The second link is found in the goals that are pursued through personal freedom. This point is important to Oman's argument. Moral vision is not apart from the reality of God: "the will of God and the moral order are one". [9] In this, of course, he reveals his philosophical heritage. From the realism of Henry Calderwood to the personal idealism of Pringle Pattison there was the assumption that moral ideals form a link to the transcendent. This is the background to Oman's three-fold affirmation that God is known through will, feeling and intellect. Self-direction is an exercise in responsibility that lifts life above mere impulse to participation in moral reality. Self-determination is a conscious decision to follow conscience rather than custom and habit; and, the policing of our own self-conscious world saves life from "perpetual domestic anarchy".[10] The significance of freedom, therefore, lies in the personal goals that it may achieve. If faith is dead without works, then one could say freedom is empty without works; an abstract concept apart from the positive content. Communion with God is contingent on freedom reaching up to highest ideals and following its deepest intuitions.[11] Freedom is a promissory note given to human

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[9] *Grace and Personality*, 53.

[10] *Grace and Personality*, 55.

[11] It is important to note that Oman makes a distinction between ethics, which are rules of conduct, and morals, which are a form of the sacred. Rules of conduct, he writes "must never be exalted to the throne of the universe". It is *ideals* that enable communion with God; but, they are a form of the sacred. *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 314.

beings, but it needs to be redeemed through action, in order that its worth may be realised.

1.2 Idea of grace

The foregoing examination of freedom and ideals enables an understanding Oman's reconstructed religion. As it stands, however, it has a decidedly Kantian shape to it. In the absence of a theology of grace, Oman might well be suspected of reducing religion to morality: nothing would be further from his intention. Freedom realised in higher values would be, for Oman, a skeleton religion, even if such a religion were possible. A full appreciation of Divine reality must encompass more than freedom and ideals, especially as ideals are bounteous and freedom meagre. Oman, therefore, sought a theology of grace that would aid human beings without impinging on freedom, or, least of all, substituting itself for freedom. In *Grace and Personality*, therefore, Oman's primary concern was to highlight the problematic nature of grace as traditionally understood. In reformed theology, grace is understood as an instrument of divine omnipotence. Such a concept cannot but override the autonomy necessary for the growth of moral personality. More than that, Oman argues, to "any one with a measure of an open mind", it is becomes "distressingly evident" that if grace functions as irresistible might, then we must conclude that he does not care about the deplorable state of the world. Oman is not convinced by compromise solutions which would save God's honour by confining grace to special spheres. For instance, Catholic theology "ring fences" the Church as a sphere of grace apart from the world; and, in reformed theology, there is a distinction between efficacious grace and common grace.[12] For Oman, these compromises are unconvincing. The restriction of grace to special channels would surely reveal "in the Infinite a strangely parsimonious mind".[13]

The fundamental error in each case is an error in method. Theology has traditionally begun with an *a priori* idea: from "the bare idea of omnipotence".[14] In the real world

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[12] *Grace and Personality*, Chapter Five, 34-38.

[13] *Grace and Personality*, 36.

[14] *Grace and Personality*, 14.

of experience nothing works in that fashion. Even such matters as truth and morality are arrived at by the slowness of human insight and are often delayed by human obstinacy. Oman writes:

> When we turn from argument to reality, there is little to show that either truth or righteousness ever came by way of irresistible might. Progress winds slowly forward, fretting at every obstacle and constantly turning upon its path, never working with absolute things, but always with the struggle of human thought and purpose. The long sorrowful experience of the ages seems to show that the last thing God thinks of doing is to drive mankind, with resistless rein, on the highway of righteousness.[15]

Grace, therefore, should be modelled on experience, rather than on *a priori* argument. Experience teaches that nothing valuable is ever taught, or learned, in haste. And, more importantly, the encouragement of the teacher and the freedom of the pupil are never alien to each other, but are complementary. This is the way of advancement in knowledge and truth. In a parallel manner, grace, far from working instrumentally and impersonally, is as personal as the most intimate human relationships, indeed more so.

Oman's classic definition of grace was accordingly that of "a gracious personal relationship". But this can be misunderstood if taken apart from the rest of his thought. First, though, it is a personal relationship; it is never a private relationship. This was another weakness in the view of grace as instrumental; it favoured the select few, or, in theological terms, the elect. The grace of God, on the contrary, is extended to all and works through all. If grace, Oman writes, were merely an individual gift, it would be like the gift "of a fond and foolish parent". In reality, grace comes to human beings for their common benefit. We are not "God's spoilt children", having bread when others have none. At least, that is not God's design. It is as we live as members one of another that grace takes on reality and we are delivered from self regard to mutual care. The most accurate way of speaking about Oman's concept of grace is to describe it as the atmosphere in which we live: in many instances unrecognised, or unnamed, but as real as the physical atmosphere that sustains life. The term "environment" in *The Natural and the Supernatural*,

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[15] *Grace and Personality*, 15-16.

catches his essential meaning and complements the idea of grace found in his earlier work. Grace is personal and relational, but it is all-encompassing and is as real and available as the needful rain from heaven.

In this personal world, grace is transformed from an instrument of omnipotence to an environment of personal nurture. Oman uses the more dated word "succour", but the meaning is the same. God nurtures human beings without inhibiting freedom; and, our shared human experience is the field of God's nurturing presence. The atmosphere of grace is transforming of the entire human perspective on the world and on life. Nothing is outside its sphere. For that reason, moral issues, Oman argued, should never be considered in isolation from religion and neither should religion dictate morality. Indirectly, religion should provide "the sphere in which persons have absolute worth and duties have sacred obligation".[16] When we live in the atmosphere of grace, therefore, nothing is changed and everything is changed. Moral tasks remain, but, in the light of grace, they are divine opportunities and no longer simply moral imperatives. Oman writes:

> If these considerations are sound, Augustinianisms (sic) have all started from the beginning, on the wrong road. Attention is fixed on grace as a gift merely given, and on works as human resolves merely carried through, with no attention paid to the gracious relation of the father to His children which does away with hard contrasts between tasks and gifts.[17]

Grace introduces us to another world from that of morality, but not through the neglect of moral responsibility; rather, in the sphere of grace, the burden of being a moral person is transfigured into being a child of God in God's family, that is, the human family.

One further important factor in Oman's theological reconstruction of grace is the unity of authority. Because God can be known only through experience, the question of whether one should obey the voice of experience or the demands of religious authority does not arise. Nothing is true because God wills it; rather, what is true is willed by God. "We believe that God is love", Oman writes, "when we can reverse it

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[16] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 388.

[17] *Grace and Personality*, 86.

and say that love is God, that, in whatsoever weakness it may meet us, it wields the might of omnipotence."[18] Anything short of this assertion will end with dual authority and divided loyalty. Oman honours a single *magisterium*: the voice of experience. It marks the completion of a process which, as he observed, has its roots in the protestant reformation. God is finally freed from the constraint of sacred place, book and doctrine. Now, being in touch with God is essentially an experience of freedom and a reliance on love. These form one liberating whole. Thus, Oman's reconciliation of freedom and faith in a reconstructed theology of grace becomes a radical spirituality, apposite to a world where the iconoclasm of reason has cut down the ancient authorities and all but banished material expressions of the sacred.

In these ways, Oman saw the great divorce between freedom and faith as something that can be brought to an end. It is possible, he believed, to unite them in "an equal marriage"; thus, grace and autonomy may be understood as "an organic unity of dependence and independence".[19]In personal experience this reconciliation is self authenticating; and, there need be no conflict between conscience and consecration. Oman sums up the reconciliation as follows:

> God cannot be served by setting conscience on one side and consecration on the other. To be independent moral persons, legislating for ourselves, so far from being hostile to true knowledge and service of God, is the imperative condition without which God can neither be known or served.[20]

Conscience being synonymous with morality and consecration with religion, if they are reconciled in personal experience of personal reality, then the ancient breach need not be perpetuated. Freedom and faith can share a common home and serve one spiritual end, the glory of God.

Summary

This section has examined Oman's re-shaping of theology in order to accommodate personal freedom and religious authority. Oman sought a resolution through the

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[18] *Grace and Personality*, 138.

[19] *Grace and Personality*, 66.

[20] *Grace and Personality*, 53.

concept of personality and a revision of the idea of grace. Personality is premised on self-determining, self-directing, self-conscious freedom. This freedom is both the outcome of evolution and a divine gift. The co-ordinates of freedom are the ideals that appeal to conscience; and, the free pursuit and realisation of ideals is experience of God. However, religion is not to be reduced to morality. Whereas ideals are the co-ordinates of freedom, grace is the ground of both. And, being grounded in grace, freedom and morals alike are transformed. Grace is an atmosphere, an environment where the natural is bathed in the light of the supernatural. Gone is the idea of grace as irresistible might. Grace, being the atmosphere which enfolds all of life, is a common currency, not a private possession. Yet, being personal, it cannot be imparted impersonally, but must to be personally appropriated. In addition, it is important to note that Oman casts overboard all notions of authority external to experience. God speaks with one voice through the whole range of experience. This principle has consequences for the whole of Oman's theology. [21]

2 Freedom and metaphysics: a mindful universe

This section moves from consideration of freedom as a personal reality to freedom as a cosmic reality. Most readers approach the cosmological dimension of Oman's thought via *The Natural and the Supernatural*, published fourteen years after the publication of *Grace and Personality*. However, a series of lesser known articles, printed in 1922, is invaluable for a clear understanding of Oman's metaphysical thinking.[22] These short papers show that the theological perspective found in *Grace and Personality* did not develop in isolation; also, they reveal that the arguments put forward in *The Natural and the Supernatural* were not simply later reflections. There

[21] As a twentieth century solution to the problem of freedom and faith, Oman's solution has not had a wide reading. But, to a minority, his solution has been convincing. For example, Stephen Bevans finds in Oman "a consistent and powerful doctrine of God's personal and gracious relationship to humanity, one in which men and women are called to genuine autonomy and mature freedom through responsibility and commitment to God, to one another and to their world". Stephen Bevans, *John Oman and his Doctrine of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 117.

[22] "Looking Round our Position", *The Student Movement*, 24 (March 1922), 98-100; "The Mathematical Mechanical Order", *The Student Movement*, 24 (April 1922), 153-5; "Mind as the Measure of the Universe", *The Student Movement*, 24 (May 1922), 171-173; "The Sacred as the Measure of the Man", *The Student Movement*, 24 (June 1922), 194.

is a considerable overlap in content between the earlier articles, written for students, and his *magnum opus*. The benefit of the former articles lies in their clarity of argument, unencumbered with the justifications found in the later work. However, the justifications are significant and illuminating, too. In *The Natural and the Supernatural,* Oman is concerned to establish a holistic ontology contrary to Kant's bifurcation of reality into phenomena and noumena and distinct from Hegel's dialectical synthesis. And, not withstanding the empirical findings of science, the universe is part of a larger, transcendent whole, grounded in freedom and love. For that reason, it is a suitable environment for persons. The universe may be described as mindful and it yields its secrets to honest enquiry, to reverent attitudes and to loving concern. This is the metaphysical perspective we find in Oman's short papers.

2.1 Oman's cosmic vision

In the shorter papers, published in the *Student Movement*, the vision Oman portrays is of a world charged with meaning, mediated through the entirety of experience and freely appropriated by the human spirit. It is a dialogical world, open to human investigation and responsive to human interest. Expressed otherwise, the universe is a mediator and it is by means of the world that Mind reveals itself to minds. However, this requires active engagement by human beings. Oman goes so far as to say that we must make the natural world "more diaphanous for the spiritual".[23] Meaning is not imposed, but it may be discovered through sincerity of heart, application of intellect and commitment of will. The universe waits for the touch of the human spirit. Thereby, the universe opens its secrets to the searching soul. The *sine qua non* of such disclosure is openness to experience in all its facets; this is the first subject that Oman deals with as he addresses a wider student audience through the medium of his articles in *The Student Movement.*[24]

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[23] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 338.

[24] I have been unable to establish the origin of *The Student Movement*, though Mrs Thompson, the librarian in Westminster College, Cambridge, suggested to me, in September 2010, that it was an early publication of the Student Christian Movement. Thanks to Adam Hood, University of Birmingham, for making photocopies available.

In “Looking Round Our Position”, the target of Oman’s criticism and wit is the human tendency to take a narrow perspective on life and on the mystery of the world. Often, he believes, this comes down to just an inexplicable mental attitude. A person’s age with respect to the date on their birth certificate is one thing; but, their mental age is quite another matter. “Some are born old and would as soon admit a new idea as a burglar.”[25] The situation is compounded, Oman believed, by the nature of education and the emphasis on specialism. He continues his burglar metaphor.

> A great many more have their limits fixed before twenty five by their particular interests, which, with students, is usually their special groove in study; while most people at forty, if they do not close the door, keep it carefully on the chain, to have a good look at a new idea, and make sure that it is innocuous before opening.[26]

Oman, though aware that any system of education will have limitations, champions the older, broader, pattern that took in as many subjects as possible for as long as possible. Admitting that “it did not succeed in making students learned in all its varied branches”,[27] and, “with most of us did not succeed even with one”, it was, nevertheless, a great incentive to wide horizons. A broad education was more likely to leave a student both hungry for knowledge and challenged. To come to grief on “spherical trigonometry”, to founder on “the binomial theorem”,[28] or not to have enough grasp of “ancient tongues to be classical scholars”, in itself prompts reverence and humility. The demand for specialism, therefore, with regard to university entrance requirements, was for Oman to wrong foot the student at an important stage in education. The harmful effect, he believed, filtered down to the school curriculum.

> This effect on schools could at once be stopped by the universities abolishing all special scholarship, and giving scholarships in all departments upon general knowledge and mental development necessary for success and freedom in any specialising. This ought to be

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[25] “Looking Round our Position”, 98.

[26] “Looking Round our Position”, 98.

[27] “Looking Round our Position”, 99.

[28] “Looking Round our Position”, 99.

> done at once, but in the universities themselves there is no way backward.[29]

Oman, in these remarks, reflects a traditional Scottish outlook as to the necessity of width in education. But, at root, he is making a general philosophical point: that experience is wider than anything that can be measured by any one discipline. This is key to his argument in the next of his papers, namely that science is a tool, a very useful tool, for measuring those aspects of experience that are amenable to mathematical measurement. However, to measure mathematically is to investigate only one aspect of reality, namely "fixed uniformities". This, for Oman, is the glory and weakness of scientific enquiry. Science epitomises free enquiry and honest engagement, leading to knowledge and management of environment. The paradox, however, is that, in isolation from other spheres of knowledge, scientific knowledge distorts. This is principally because it overlooks its own subjectivity. It is the mind, the "I", that makes all knowledge possible, and no knowledge exists apart from minds.[30] Environment can never, therefore, be adequately comprehended merely in its physical aspect. Environment is both material and spiritual. Indeed, as James Ward remarked, "it is truer to say that the universe is a life than that it is a mechanism".[31] Perhaps Oman would not have expressed it quite in those terms. However, he certainly affirmed that the universe is the bearer of meaning to be appropriated in freedom.

> When the mind becomes conscious and interprets its environment by reason and proceeds to manage it by considered and deliberate purpose, environment is found to be neither adamant nor putty, but an ordered reliable universe, giving conscious meaning and responding to conscious purpose. It is an environment the order of which we only

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[29] "Looking Round our Position", 99.

[30] In affirming the centrality of mind, Oman was making a point common to idealism.

[31] James Ward, *Naturalism and Agnosticism*, Vol.1 (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1899), 180; quoted in *The Natural and the Supernatural*, Page 250. Oman and Ward shared the view that the universe cannot be fully comprehended within a causal nexus. James Ward (1843-1925) was twice Gifford lecturer: 1896-98, *Naturalism and Agnosticism*, and 1907-1909, *The Realm of Ends, or Pluralism and Theism*. Ward was a Congregationalist student for the ministry, a pupil of Dorner and of Lotze, psychologist and philosopher. He succeeded Henry Sidgwick as Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge in 1897 and his tenure overlapped with Oman's at Westminster College.

> discover as we are free, but then our freedom enlarges the more we understand its order.[32]

Whether one can speak of the universe as "living" or not, it is, nevertheless, responsive to human enquiry and to independent thinking. That the universe is not reducible to scientific materialism, but facilitates the expansion of knowledge and freedom, is the theme that Oman takes up in the second of his papers.

In "The Mathematical Mechanical Order", Oman begins with a retrospect on Newtonian physics which sought to explain reality under the laws of motion. At its heart was the law of inertia; namely, that all motion continues as it is unless changed by other motion. The difficulty was to explain how a world of complex meaning ever emerged if reality is as precise and uniform as in the Newtonian model. Various theories were invented to the effect that, given enough time, and, if the process were slow enough, all kinds of change could emerge out of uniformity. But, comments Oman, "it remained perplexingly certain that a law of inertia is a law that does nothing except continue as it is".[33] Oman proceeds to argue that changes in physics, which have left the Newtonian model behind, mean that the idea that science can yield "a simple final picture of reality" is no longer tenable.[34] "Physics", Oman wrote, "no longer even professes to show us the real reality of the world. Nor does it profess to give us the reason why of any experience".[35] On this ground, Oman argues, science is essentially a tool, enabling real and important, but partial, knowledge.

Furthermore, what science reveals is order and regularity in the universe. However, the case is overstated if, thereby, it is thought that freedom does not exist. It is, Oman argues, the correlate of order. In experience, both order and freedom are necessary; as, for example, with the structure of the English alphabet and the freedom it gives to the expression of ideas. It is as meaningless to say that all our varied experience can be reduced to "uniformities of measure and motion" as to say that all English

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[32] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 330.

[33] "The Mathematical Mechanical Order",124.

[34] "The Mathematical Mechanical Order",124.

[35] "The Mathematical Mechanical Order", 124.

literature can be reduced to twenty six letters.[36] In *The Natural and the Supernatural*, when dealing with this point, among the several illustrations Oman employs is that of an organ builder. Knowledge of sound, as vibration, is essential for the construction of the instrument. The mathematically calculable relation of vibration to sound must be accurate; and the musician is entirely dependent on that accuracy if the organ is to serve its musical purpose. On the other hand, the music played is, in the final analysis, the expression of the mind of the musician. This is indicative of how, in general, freedom and structure are correlates in the universe.[37]

Overall, Oman exhibits a healthy and knowledgeable regard for science; but, he is always intent on viewing science in a larger metaphysical perspective. The empirical reality of the world is important, being one half of the environment in which human beings live and move and have their being. The realm of ideals is the other half. The tragedy is that these realities often fall apart, often through the imperialism of one perspective. It is a human failure when this happens. The example of the organ builder and the organist is illustrative of how we can push one aspect of reality to extremes and miss the other: "it is of the dullness of our souls that we use our science to measure the pipes and miss the music of the spheres".[38]

In "The Evolutionary Historical Process", Oman finds the opposite of order and regularity. The "actual changes in time" manifest "a multitudinous influx of new things, amid which it is difficult to find any scheme at all".[39] The main characteristic of an evolving world is that of ever new creation. This is true at all levels of evolution: biological and cultural and, even in the cosmic scale of things, "masses of worlds have been formed and the elements that compose them have come into existence".[40] Again, explanations that confine themselves to physical determinism are, for Oman, unsatisfactory; not least because, in excluding purpose, they struggle to "get beyond blind accident". He writes:

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[36] "The Mathematical Mechanical Order", 125.

[37] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 257.

[38] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 257.

[39] "The Evolutionary Historical Process", 153.

[40] "The Evolutionary Historical Process", 153.

> When we look at the actual facts of change we are faced….not by a process all mechanically explicable, but by its opposite. The question is whether we have more than accident, the result of endless throws of blind dice, out of which selection is made by equally some blind principle of survival.[41]

Oman's response, as one might expect, was to posit that "the directing element in evolution is mind".[42] His argument is "that we have no right to explain the higher by the lower"; on the contrary, "we must try to understand the mind in its lowly beginnings by what it is capable of becoming".[43] Evolution is not merely an emergent process, but a teleological process, with a goal before it. Accordingly, purpose may be traced to the lowest levels of evolution where there is a free response to meaning in environment. Oman describes the process as follows:

> Even very low forms of life flow out of unpleasant liquid into a pleasant one. That is to say, it is acting, however feebly, on its own feeling, however faint, guided by its own intelligence however dim.[44]

Thus, as Oman repeats, evolution is led from the front. The ultimate survival of the fittest is a spiritual survival, as creation moves freely towards the goal and purpose of God, which is love. However, because the goal of God's creation can be realised only in freedom, the possibility of it going wrong is great. In the evolutionary process there is neither room for cheap optimism nor shallow pessimism, but a continual imperative to seek the highest. Apart from the imperative to reach forward to the highest and best, "fitness" is no more than "fitness to persist in a particular environment". One might, accordingly, say, "the mole is as fit as the man of genius,

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[41] "The Evolutionary Historical Process", 154.

[42] "The Evolutionary Historical Process", 154.

[43] "The Evolutionary Historical Process", 154.

This view of the universe as serving a higher purpose than material evolution, finds sympathetic presentation in the work of Keith Ward. In relation to what he calls the "God Hypothesis", he writes: The God hypothesis connects personal and scientific explanation by postulating that there is an overarching cosmic personal explanation that explains physical states and laws as means to realizing some envisaged purpose. Keith Ward, *Why there is almost certainly a God: Doubting Dawkins* (London: Lion Books, 2008), 25. Ward makes no reference to Oman. A more direct link to Oman, and an acknowledgement of his influence is found in Ruth Page, see, Ruth Page, *Ambiguity and the Presence of God*, (London: SCM, 1985).

[44] "The Evolutionary Historical Process", 154.

the head hunter as the philanthropist".[45] But, if evolution is towards the final purpose of love, then fitness takes on an entirely new meaning.

In "Mind as the Measure of the Universe",[46] we find the reiteration of the foregoing points. There is a real frontier "between the individual and the rest of the world";[47] Mind is the source and *telos* of creation; and, in freedom, the universe moves towards fulfilment in the loving purpose of God. Consequently, the history of human experience may be thought of as a long education. "It must even mean" argues Oman, "that the universe which gives us our experience also teaches us the standards by which to measure it."[48] This remark sums up Oman's cosmology. The universe is charged with meaning,[49] it serves a purpose greater than itself; this purpose can be accessed, and its meaning discovered, by individual minds acting in independence and freedom.

The final point that Oman argues is that the mind is distinct from the brain. It is not a case of parallelism between the brain and the mind as when "mist is over the stream";[50] rather, mind is the independent, creative source of meaning. Oman rejects equally the materialist view of the mind as purely an epiphenomenon. The brain, as Oman understands it, is the receiver of sensations which the mind translates into meaning. Interpretation is the work of the mind. It is not that the mind imposes meaning after the manner of Kantian categories; rather, experience mirrors a world of meaning that the mind can know and express as knowledge. The mind might be compared to the spectacles that enable human beings to read from the book of the

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[45] "The Evolutionary Historical Process", 155.

[46] Though Oman published this paper as second in the series, I refer to it at this point because it is really the key to his overall perspective, combining personal idealism with empiricism.

[47] "Mind as the Measure of the Universe", 171.

[48] "Mind as the Measure of the Universe", 173.

[49] Oman uses the word "meaning" widely. In his usage it is synonymous with "interpretation". Knowledge is the fruit of interpretation. He writes: "Thus knowing is not knowledge as an effect of an unknown cause, but is knowledge as we so interpret that our meaning is the actual meaning of our environment." *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 175.

[50] "Mind as the Measure of the Universe", 171. In the *Natural and the Supernatural*, Oman elaborates on this point, arguing that, even if a parallelism between the brain and the mind could be proved, "it would settle nothing. One would still be first in principle and be the creative factor, just as speech and thought develop together and in mutual dependence, yet, it is thought, not speech that is creative". *Natural and the Supernatural*, 187.

universe, discovering its transcendent meaning and purpose. But, one needs to consider the place of the heart as well as that of the mind. The danger is that our reading may be one-sided and too intellectual. Reverence and humility are as necessary for meaningful reading as intellectual curiosity.

Summary

This exegesis of Oman's short papers outlines a consistent ontology. The universe is meaningful because it is the expression of Mind. The danger is that the imperialism of one branch of knowledge will foreclose a vision of the whole. Indeed, the whole can be grasped only as vision. Reality is personal, grounded in freedom and love and, in that environment human beings may explore, grow, and come with the rest of creation to the fullness of potential in God. But Oman is not just a visionary; his work resembles the assembly of a jigsaw. Each piece contributes towards the whole and he is anxious to dispel the human tendency to take the part for the whole. Many things offend in this respect. Thus, Oman makes a plea for a broad education. This, he believed, is likely to stimulate the widest enquiry into the meaning of life and of the universe; and, width in education could save human beings and cultures from retreating into a narrow dogmatism. Unfortunately, science, which has given so much to humanity, is for Oman the greatest offender with respect to sectional interest. The nineteenth century was marked by the imperialism of a scientific world view at the expense of others. Oman, however, was well informed as a layman in the scientific field. Consequently, he was hopeful that, in time, science might be relieved of its more sweeping assertions. For example, in the advance of science, from a Newtonian model to a post Einstein paradigm, there was hope of integrating science into a wider ontology. The world in the light of modern physics is somewhat misnamed as a mechanical order; it is more of a living reality.

Oman lamented that the new discoveries in physics were not paralleled in biology. However, were he alive today, it would be the link between genetics and evolution that would preoccupy his thinking. His argument may very well be the same: the evolutionary process needs also to be viewed in the larger context of transcendent interpretation. Oman found purpose and teleology are more conducive to evolution than mere chance and necessity. These perspectives on physics, biology and

evolution are all predicated upon Mind, or God, as the ultimate reality. Oman differs from idealists, however, in that he does not wish to reduce reality to mind; the empirical reality of the universe has also a place in the divine economy. Indeed, the empirical and the ideal are complementary halves of one reality. In order to navigate the wonders of such a universe of fact and meaning, God has endowed human beings with freedom; and, at every level of existence freedom, in some measure, has a part to play.

3 Freedom realized: the sacred and the holy

Oman's work centred around two foci – the personal and the cosmic. It was the fruit of his desire to see reality as one and whole. We live in a personal universe: the medium for personal experience of a personal God. In *The Natural and the Supernatural*, Oman determines to analyse the elements that contribute to this dual reality. Among its themes are epistemology, the nature of religion, the evolution of the universe and the evolution of culture. Two things, however, are of special relevance. First, Oman gives considerable space to the subject of human freedom; and, secondly, he introduces the terms "sacred" and "holy" to illustrate how divine reality is made known, or revealed, to human experience. This section begins with the former.

3.1 Freedom in human experience

In Chapter XVII of *The Natural and the Supernatural*, Oman takes up the question of freedom under the heading of "The will to live and the will to live better". He acknowledges the seminal influence of William James, whose contribution to the subject "was true and important". What Oman found particularly attractive in James was his understanding of freedom as self-creating agency, "not a mere wavering of the balance according to weights put on scales".[51] It is a pity that Oman was not more discursive with regard to James' treatment of the subject. James emphasised that the will is free from pre-determination. This was particularly the case in his earlier thinking when he indentified himself as an indeterminist, believing that all future

[51] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 289.

determinations are down to "chance". James believed that any other definition of freedom is "pretence", somewhat like "restoring a caged bird to liberty with one hand, while with the other we anxiously tie a string to its leg, to make sure it does not go beyond our sight".[52] In his later thinking, however, James put the emphasis, not on chance, but on possibility. This is nearer to Oman's understanding of the term. The world is saturated through and through with possibilities and these may be realised through personal engagement; in other words, through Oman's triumvirate of self-determination, self-direction and personal self-consciousness.

On the matter of Oman's general relation to James, it may be characterised as a case of different orientation, though with overlapping emphasis. James' idea of the universe as a *Thou*, his radical empiricism predicated on the stream of experience, his idea that religious belief is to be tested against practice, all find resonance in Oman. However, the differences between James and Oman are significant. For Oman, God is an experience shaping, personality reality rather than a postulate, or hypothesis, on which to risk faith; and, there is no sense in which human responses contribute to the being of God. James, on the other hand, could write:

> I confess that I do not see why the very existence of an invisible world may not in part depend on my personal response which any one of us may make to the religious appeal. God himself, in short, may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity.[53]

It is very different with Oman's supernatural. The biblical distinction between the Creator and creation is maintained and God, though personal, is always transcendent. Human freedom represents a relationship *ad extra,* not a relation *ad intra,* to the being of God.[54]

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[52] Cited in, W. R. Boyce Gibson, *God with us* (Adam and Charles Clarke, 1909), 208. Boyce Gibson, a personal contemporary of Oman, gives a succinct summary of James' understanding of will and freedom.

[53] William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* in *The Works of William James* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), 55.

[54] This point has been noted with respect to the contrast between Oman and Pringle Pattison in Chapter Two. Comparison with Boyce Gibson is interesting also. Boyce Gibson writes: "By "God" we mean the Supreme Personal Principle of the Spiritual Life, the principle through union with which we ourselves first become persons and ends in ourselves. This Personal Principle, as we conceive it is at once immanent and transcendent in relation to us, the Soul of our soul, and also its Oversoul, in the

In addition, just as Oman was suspicious of any confusion between the human and the divine, he was also suspicious of the idea that the sub-conscious may contribute directly to personality. For James, a psychologist, conversion and saintliness both may have roots in the "buried self".[55] But, for Oman, nothing that enters by the "trap door" of the sub-conscious can make a contribution to a conscious relation to God. In *Grace and Personality,* he wrote:

> Conversion is thought to rise by unrelated miracle from the sub-conscious, like Aphrodite from the sea, only because of confusion of things that differ. If conversion means true awakening to our true relation both to God and man, and not merely amending of disposition, how can it be other than by conscious insight.[56]

"Conscious insight" is, for Oman, paramount. Therefore, whilst Oman can say that James' understanding of freedom as self determining agency is "true and important", he would have found James' idea of personality compromised by its liaisons. In Oman's thinking, freedom exists uncontaminated by the sub-conscious. In other words, freedom is the determining principle of character, whereas the sub-conscious contributes to disposition.[57]

Returning to the main subject of our discussion freedom in human experience, freedom has always, for Oman, to be "won". This is true both with respect to the natural world and the supernatural realm. In other words, the natural world offers obstacles to human freedom; and, in the realm of the supernatural, though it is fundamentally "an order of freedom", freedom is not passively given. Freedom in every sphere must be actively appropriated. This takes us again to the significance of grace as the environment in which we live and move and have our being. One must not strive to be free or moral; this would lead only to a focus on self, rather than upon

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sense God may be said to be inclusive of us as personalities." *God with us*, Page 213. Oman stops short of the affirmation of God in us, though is happy with God with us.

[55] *God with us*, 180.

[56] *Grace and Personality*, 78.

[57] The demarcation between disposition and character, that Oman draws so absolutely, is at odds a holistic understanding of the person. It is Oman's moral definition of personality, following Calderwood and ultimately Kant, which makes him so uncompromising on the point. See further comment in appraisal.

the transcendent order. The continual feel of one's own moral pulse can never lead to the freedom of the children of God. Thus, the attitude required is that of devotion. Piety in a wide and untrammelled sense of the word is fundamental to a life of freedom and goodness because it directs the whole person away from self to the requirements of God. Freedom is born of spiritual participation; it is never a "succession of individual acts" but "a steadfast choice of a world in which we are free in feeling as well as will".[58] In this way, Oman worked towards an integrated theology of freedom, personality and grace, premised on the reality of one supernatural environment. However, he also gave particular attention to the dynamic of freedom in human experience. The main points are as follows:

First, freedom may be only the freedom of indifference and this should not be considered unimportant. Indifference positively conceived may spare the soul from the allurements of the world. Absence of indifference may be the harbinger of woe as in the starvation of Buridan's ass. Can one attribute the ass's starvation solely to the fact of his equidistance between two stacks of hay? Had the ass been indifferent to the fact of there being two, the outcome may well have been other than it was. Too much information may overload and inhibit, unless there is the freedom of healthy indifference.

Secondly, in Oman's estimation, however, real progress in the evolution of freedom came when human beings discovered the power to say No! The ability to say no marked a real boundary between the world and the individual. No longer were human beings the playthings of events, desires or circumstances. This power is evidenced in the laws of Hammurabi and in the law codes of Deuteronomy. It carries through to Paul's idea of the Spirit's dominion over the flesh, and to Kant's idea of an absolute imperative. The resulting gains are real and valuable, even if incomplete. The natural world – whether considered as natural disposition, lust, greed and desire for power or as natural relations, neighbourhood, family or tribe – may "stand in the sharpest antagonism" to "any right moral relation".[59] The power to stand over and against all such claims marks real emancipation. This is true, Oman argues, even if it

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[58] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 309.

[59] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 305.

is only the freedom to bear with relations and circumstances that cannot be changed. The freedom to "bear with" is real freedom; but it, too, has to be won.

Thirdly, there is emancipation more large and spacious that anything derived from negative commandments, important though they be. It is the liberty that comes from saying yes to the true, beautiful and good. It is what Oman calls seeking the "better country of the spirit." He writes:

> Only as we seek a better country can we leave the worse, even though we must also be ready to go out, not knowing whether we go, as a way of seeking it. The steadfast intentness of the better country of the spirit, not the sporadic denials of the attractions of the lower, is a good will. And it has to do with what we are and cannot change, and with what we may become and should by right doing be changing.[60]

Thus, freedom, in the higher sense, is the fruit of aspiration more than renunciation or the repression of evil. There is an emancipation that comes with reverence and devotion that mere renunciation can never dream of, never mind realise. The power to say no may have heralded a real spiritual advance for humankind, but morality based on renunciation will always, Oman believed, fall short of the joy of the Lord.

3.2 The divine in human experience

The co-ordinate of human freedom is the divine reality that manifests itself through the world. Only the extreme sceptic doubts the reality of the physical world; many, however, doubt the reality of the spiritual. Yet, no more than the physical can the spiritual world be proven by inference from anything else. It is a reality which can be known only as it is inhabited. Oman writes:

> Religion is, above all else, concerned with 'moving about in worlds not realised'. We may be living by this higher environment as in water live by air, and be equally ignorant of the fact: and the reason may be lack of interest not capacity.[61]

Whilst the natural world is known through sensation, the spiritual is known though the absolute values it inspires. The sacred embodies transcendent values that can be grasped by intuition, but never completely appropriated. The holy describes the

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[60] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 304.

[61] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 5.

feeling that accompanies a conviction of what is sacred. The judgement of what is sacred and the accompanying feeling of reverence, though distinct, are never apart; and both are integral to the supernatural. These concepts were examined in chapter two, in the comparison of Oman's sense of the holy and that of Veitch and Windelband. The most recent and detailed examination of them is found in Adam Hood, where he gives critical analysis of their epistemological foundations. Here, however, our concern is with the sacred and the holy as co-ordinates of freedom. The key concept in Oman's thinking is that freedom evolved in proportion to the discovery of values. Freedom and value were birthed together in the evolution of human consciousness; and they grow together in human experience. Without values, human beings would be indistinguishable from the animal world, creatures of mere instinct and impulse. The first and earliest realisation of freedom, therefore, came, Oman believes, with humankind's sense of the sacred, the sense of absolute value. Even at that early stage, in fact particularly so, freedom and value were not separate from the material world. Hence, the identification of the sacred with material things; what Oman calls the material sacred.

The material sacred has been a liberation; but it has also been a limitation. As liberation of the human spirit, the sacred has embodied a sense of the infinite over and beyond the finite; it has embodied the call of God to duty and sacrifice. Material expressions of the sacred, on the other hand, have set severe limits to freedom, in that they are contextual. The sacred and the holy have, in primitive times, been circumscribed by holy places and things. Thus, the prophets of Israel protested against cultic worship and called people to ethical action. With time, the advent of the written word was an improvement, being infinitely more applicable to ethical actions and moral duties. Yet, it too assumed an absoluteness that is incompatible with the evolving, living nature of religion. For example, as a written code, the tradition of the prophets became more important than the spirit of prophecy. Oman writes: "though in all ages there has been much building of the tombs of the prophets to honour them as tradition and conceal their character as disturbers of tradition".[62] Still, tradition can be built upon, and, where need be, departed from, and there is

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[62] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 307

always more radical freedom to be discovered in the supernatural. The lowest religion has the eschatological promise of freedom at its core, just as the most developed has some sense of material embodiment lingering in its self-understanding: for example, when sacraments are considered to have some sort of efficacious power in themselves and are not perceived as pointers to the transcendent and immaterial love of God. Oman writes:

> When we speak contemptuously of mere symbols and insist that sacraments are special operations of grace, vehicles not symbols, we are merely setting the working of omnipotence above the gracious personal love of the Father, which is the same as measuring a token of love by its material value.[63]

Oman's critical attitude to material embodiment of religion – whether in sacraments or, as we shall see in chapter six, in institutions – arises from the idea fundamental to his thinking, namely, that divine-human relations cannot be tied to any one realisation of them. God and human beings must always grow and develop through personal insight and judgement. Therefore, the localising of God in any earthly reality cannot be reconciled to a developing *I-Thou* relationship that is grounded in freedom and love. It was Oman's strong conviction that real emancipation is experienced when, in "our own independent judgement", we stand before "the witness of reality" in responsibility, freedom and the power of love. He writes:

> Above the compulsion of necessary law, up to the perfect harmony of an obedience bound only by the free choice of love which beats with the heart of the Eternal, we are called to aspire.[64]

The divine reality, therefore, that speaks through the world, from beyond the world, culminates in a sense of the sacred and the holy that grows and develops in tandem with the realisation of freedom and in parallel with transformation through love.

3.3 Comment

In Oman's reflections on the sacred and the holy the evolutionary modality of Oman's thinking is obvious. He was essentially an evolutionary theologian. His

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[63] *Grace and Personality*, 229.

[64] *Vision and Authority*, 388.

belief is that, if the universe is evolving, then religion must evolve, and in that evolution are to be found the beginnings of freedom and knowledge. This conviction is the source of Oman's most radical ideas. It is, for example, the ground of his view that finality cannot be affirmed of any revelation. Also, material sacred may one day be left behind as a remnant of a bygone era; and theology itself must not assume finality. This is like attempting to catch the eternal flow of divine revelation in the sieve of time. Even historical revelation, as embodied in scriptures and creeds, must always be treated as provisional when measured against the sacredness of freedom and love.

But Oman adds the caveat: the loss of faith may be so acute that historical tradition may be needed to redeem humanity from the plight of unbelief, until the voice of the living God is heard. Historical revelation, scripture and doctrine are of value not only as historical landmarks, signalling the way that humankind has travelled in its earthly pilgrimage, but, also, they may act like a lighthouse to a ship lost in a fog. When the fog passes, then what matters is the new horizon. The distant horizon, however, can be reached only through freedom responding to the sacred; and, even then, it is never reached in time; freedom must anticipate the dawn of eternity. In Oman's language: freedom and love are increasingly realised by those who walk in faith and not by sight; who travel without security, though always in hope.

Thus, freedom was for Oman a real spiritual value and the correlate of knowledge. It gave his theology a radical edge that still is iconoclastic with respect to most of the things that Churches hold dear. F.R. Tennant comments, in his obituary contribution to the *Proceedings of the British Academy,* that Oman's restriction of divine-human relations to "personal dealings" applied "to reason and conscience" "will be judged heretical by the larger part of Christendom".[65] He also questioned Oman's basic premise that knowledge and freedom are rooted in the supernatural. Tennant acknowledged the originality of the premise, but, he asked could not conscience and

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[65] *The Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1939, 333-338. Tennant did not accept that it is necessary to posit a transcendent reality, that is, Oman's supernatural, in order to explain the origin and development of knowledge.

awareness values have "evolved from the humanness involved in sociability"?[66] Tennant's attribution of knowledge and value to social intercourse has more resonance with the secular world of today. With respect to the former point, Christendom has judged Oman more sympathetically than Tennant forecast. Overall, Oman has been more ignored than judged. In an age of ecumenism, where the core doctrines of the person of Christ, and of the Holy Trinity, have proved fruitful common ground for the study and practice of faith, Oman reads strangely alien in an ecumenical context. Bevans' study is a Catholic and sympathetic attempt to rehabilitate Oman in the Christian mainstream. As we shall see in our last chapter, I doubt whether that is where Oman would have wanted to be. His dissenting heart, his love of freedom, his faith in ineluctable evolution from material expressions of the Divine to the immaterial, would have made him an uneasy guest at the ecumenical table. Perhaps he would have had common cause with Quakers and Unitarians. A menu that is historical, ancient and non-negotiable would send Oman out to the fields like Esau, and far from the tent of Jacob, no matter about birth rights. Perhaps the leniency of criticism over the years has stemmed from only a vague appreciation of Oman's more radical agenda. Oman's key question still calls for an answer. What is the place of freedom in the world of faith? Or, as we might put it today: what is the place of faith in a world of freedom?

4 The spirituality of freedom

4.1 Mysticism

This section examines what may be called the soul's mobilisation of freedom, the experience of prayer. Here, too, Oman was somewhat paradoxical in his focus. On the one hand, his attitude to prayer and piety was insightful and generous; on the other, his criticism of mysticism was critical and uncompromising.[67] Oman's views on mysticism are examined first.

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[66] F.R. Tennant, "Book Revue of *The Natural and the Supernatural",* in *Mind*, Vol. 41, (April) 1932, 212-218.

[67] Other theologians of Oman's era were critical of the mystical element in religion. For example, Ritschl reacted to Schleiermacher's emphasis on piety as the heart of religion. Ritschl wanted to reaffirm the moral strand in theology. Oman's concern, however, was different. Like Schleiermacher,

In an early article on mysticism, Oman commented: "mysticism is a phenomenon which always appears in times of political disillusionment and intellectual discouragement."[68] Oman continues:

> Every religion is either mystical or apocalyptic and Christianity is apocalyptic. That is to say, its faith is not in God as a temple of unity into which to withdraw and the world a distraction and an evil to be escaped by austerity and austere morality. It is not a faith in direct mystic vision, but is the victory that overcomes the world, by the conscious purpose in the world as well as beyond it, where all things may be possessed and all works for good. It works by love as an objective end which a good world is in spite of evil, not by love as a compensation for an evil world, and an escape from it.[69]

The keys points are: there is no direct access to God apart from engagement with the world; experience of the rough and tumble of existence cannot be circumvented and the mystics are misled in thinking that there is an escape from the challenge of thinking. The kernel of Oman's objection, therefore, lies in epistemology. Later in the article there is a paragraph which is repeated in *The Natural and the Supernatural;*[70] there he entitles it "The Unities". It is one of the most obscure in Oman's work. The essence of it I take to be the distinction between form and experience. He does not explain his use of the language of form; for example, whether or not he uses "form" in the platonic sense of ideas, or, in the Kantian sense of the forms imposed on experience: one feels it is something akin to the latter. However, Oman's forms are not the Kantian ones of time and space, but what he calls the "unities". These are three in number: the unity of reality, of the mind and of love. These are abstractions, in themselves and apart from experience, though this does not mean they have no reality. However, should one seek to know these forms, apart from experience, then the end result is vacuous. "Yet, even in this emptied state, it is felt as the universal form of awareness that the universe is one".[71] The

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Oman valued piety: hence, his exploration of the meaning of prayer, which bears similarities to that of his German mentor. Oman's opposition to mysticism was founded on his epistemology, namely on his conviction that God can only be known through the world.

[68] *The Hibbert Journal*, 1927-28, Vol. XXVI, 454-458.

[69] *Hibbert*, 454.

[70] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 144-147.

[71] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 145.

unity that the mystic most often seeks is the "the unified frame of love apart from all content".[72] This leads to "the joy unspeakable, spoken of by all the mystics with every conceivable superlative. It is in essence the undifferentiated holy".[73] Oman's objection to the mystic way of seeking God is that it leaves experience of God content-less with respect to knowledge. The undifferentiated holy is like touch without knowing who, or what, is touched; it is like sound without knowing what is heard. When pursued as in the mystic way, Oman felt that the real substance of religion is lost; experience of life in the world is abandoned, as though it were of no importance to knowledge of reality. To escape from the world of concrete experience in order to find God is, Oman argues, something which "impresses ordinary, practical people as artificial and morbid and unreal; and it is the right impression."[74] No reviewer has endorsed Oman's assessment of mysticism. However, the root of Oman's criticism is important to note for sake of clarification. The mystic's attempt at direct experience of God, apart from temporal reality, leaves out what makes religion living faith. Oman elaborates his objections as follows:

> The right content of these forms is not emptiness, but a world of infinite variety, harmonious to the feelings, like the poet's; a world challenging to understanding and in relation to one mind, like the philosopher's; a world to be explained on a consistent principle like the scientist's; of one sphere of active victory, like the moralist's; of one reverence like the religious thinker's.[75]

In this we see, again, an understanding of faith which is secular in its sensibility;[76] knowledge of the divine is possible only if the world and God are experienced together. Oman compares this to knowledge of a person.

> In real knowing we have something very like the knowledge of a person. We know him only by his actual manifestations, but we do not then use these as facts from which to form an inference. We reach beyond to a unity whereby all we know of him is itself interpreted and

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[72] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 145.

[73] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 145.

[74] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 146.

[75] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 146.

[76] "Our Lord's religion was in a pre-eminent degree secular." *Grace and Personality*, 178.

> becomes knowledge. This reach beyond sense makes a world out of sense and is the essential element in religion.[77]

The deficit in mysticism is, thus, that it seeks to "reach beyond" experience of the world rather than to take the arduous way of letting God speak to us in our engagement with it. As a spirituality of freedom, mysticism is free at the expense of being empty of all that would make God real. The world of possibility is not possible if experience is evacuated of content. The mystic way dissolves the interactive link between everyday experience and the silence of eternity; prayer, on the other hand, finds God in the midst of earthly struggle, pain and joy. The question of the legitimacy of Oman's criticism of mysticism is taken up in the appraisal below. First, his views on prayer are examined.

4.2 Prayer

Hendrikus Berkhof points out that prayer does not feature largely in works of theology. It is perhaps an irony that much study devoted to exploring the reality of God should be slender with regard to the practical experience of God. Barth, he feels, is an exception.[78] One can make a positive case for Oman, too. The references to prayer are not abundant, but they are significant. It is in prayer that human freedom becomes an existential reality, through participation in the love of God. Prayer spans the two-fold reality of the empirical and the ideal, or earth and heaven. It is the practical realisation of the personal nature of God; it is the realm where God and human beings meet in the deepest intimacy. But, prayer is also a boundary experience where human freedom meets limitation in the mystery of the Divine will. Outside the experience of prayer, events in life may be considered accidental, fortuitous and indifferent to the welfare of any living thing. Within the experience of prayer, there is a discovery of freedom and order and reconciliation to the gracious purposes of God.

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[77] *Hibbert Journal*, 1925, Vol. 25, 456.

[78] "Barth, more than anyone else, has made prayer a dogmatic theme". See, Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of Christian Faith*, Revised Edition, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 499; Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, III,3 par. 53,3; III,4,par. 53,3; IV,2,704-06; IV.3, 882-884.

In his early collection of published sermons, *Paradox of the World,* Oman has a sermon entitled the "Laws of Prayer".[79] It is a vital insight into Oman's thinking on prayer; and, in summary, the same thoughts are found in *Honest Religion*.[80] The term "law" indicates for Oman the Divine order, but it is an order, a spiritual realm, that has room for human participation. Indeed, at some level, all of creation participates in the Divine Order; but, at the human level, the interaction is self-conscious. Freedom and order are expressions of God's wisdom and love; and, nowhere more than through prayer does this aspect of spiritual reality dawn upon the soul. Oman develops this point under the heading the "laws of prayer".

The text Oman chosen is Luke 11:9, where Jesus tells his disciples:

> And I say unto you, ask and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened unto you.

The three laws of prayer which Oman identifies here are: the law of receiving, the law of finding and the law of discovery. Existentially, they are recognisable in the hierarchy of desire, aspiration and discovery. Desire is real prayer; more real perhaps than the prayer found on the lips of devotion. "Spoken prayer may be a very superficial asking"; and, in contrast:

> Every longing is a prayer; and our most fervent prayer is our strongest longing. But if that is so, for what have you prayed? For every thing base as well as noble, you ever set your heart upon.[81]

Accordingly, prayer may express a bundle of conflicting ideas, or one "dominating desire" may surface. In any event, the law of asking and receiving applies. As the Buddhists say, "our lives follow our thoughts as the wheel the foot of the ox"; and, "every longing of the heart foreshadows some kind of realisation".[82] The law of asking and receiving is a frightening law and a call to responsibility. "Our one greatest need is to be truly taught to ask in Christ's name, so that all our desires may

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[79] *Paradox of the World*, 280-292.

[80] *Honest Religion*, 80.

[81] *Paradox of the World*, 284.

[82] *Paradox of the World*, 286.

be wholly according to our Father's love and the Father's wisdom".[83] And, with regard to public prayer, the "ennobling of our petitions" should be "one of its most imperative ends".[84] Were the law of receiving the only law operating in God's universe, it would be a chaotic place and culture would be the outward expression of the often utterly selfish desires of the heart. The law of receiving, so prone to prodigal use, is, however, limited by a higher law: that of seeking and finding.

When prayer comes to the realisation that there is a law of seeking and finding, it has entered the higher realm of aspiration. A reorientation of personality takes place that involves feeling, intellect and will and prayer begins to focus on spiritual values. High ideals become active in life and there is a meeting of minds and hearts: that of the Divine and the human. Windows are opened to heaven and olive branches return. However, there is no Hegelian identity between human aspiration and Divine reality; God, though personal, remains transcendent and the life of prayer is a life of faith. This is the root of many difficulties surrounding prayer. Because answers have to be actively sought, and human seeking is so irregular and often misdirected, progress is painful, slow and frequently disappointing. But, argues Oman, if God's good gifts are to be given personally, they cannot be distributed irrespective of the ability to understand, value and appreciate them. As he often does, he gives an agricultural illustration:

> The people whose soil and climate present them freely with food and warmth are not, in the end, so richly endowed as those who raise their bread from the clayey furrow and build their shelter under the biting wind. These blessings are not less but more beneficently given, because they do not say, "Here we are, put forth thy hand and receive," but, "We shall be here when you dig and find". And just as little do God's gifts become less free, or less gracious, or less abundant, or less sure when they cease to say, "Receive", and begin to say, "Find".
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> Of nothing is this truer than truth itself. God, we too readily assume, must speak and man simply receive. But it is not so now and never has been. God is wiser, more patient, and above all, more magnanimous.[85]

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[83] *Paradox of the World*, 284,

[84] *Paradox of the World*, 285.

[85] *Paradox of the World*, 286-287.

Thus, difficulties in prayer are like the stress of adolescence, the discipline of study, or maturing relations in marriage – they reflect the deep things in life. Difficulties in prayer reveal the glory of the world in which we live and the personal way of all progress, as well as the possibility of regress. The opposite of aspiration being sin, regression is an ever-present reality. When Oman speaks of sin, he does not mean transgression of commandments in a legal sense, but transgression against the spirit of the whole law in the failure to aspire and venture in faith. Sin, for Oman, is cast in an evolutionary paradigm.

> Thus, sin is just the higher aspect of all failure of life to lay itself open to the witness of its environment and to embrace and venture itself upon it; [break] Sin is a sin against the whole law, understanding by law not a statute, but the order of environment to be realised ever more fully by sincerity in insight, in aspiration and in consecration.[86]

In the law of finding, therefore, the stakes are very high. The venture of faith can lead to the discovery of "absolute worth"; refusal can bring failure that can be described only as "absolute loss".[87] Yet, love cannot take away the frightening reality of freedom. Nor would love want to, because the realisation of life's great goals and true purpose is contingent on personal insight and concomitant commitment. In this context, God's will in human experience advances together with, and not apart from, prayer.

The third law of prayer is that of discovery. Jesus said, "Knock and it shall be opened unto you". Oman interprets this saying as the explanation of "the long delays to which we are all subjected and by which many are discouraged. For many weary years we may stand by doors which never open to our knocking".[88] The reason that such disappointment is our common experience is, Oman believes, because prayer takes us to the realm of mystery, where even our highest ideals are provisional. This law of limitation is at the same time the law of discovery and surprise. Mystery in itself is a barren concept and the seeds that grow there are often those of scepticism and unbelief. The vast areas of ignorance that exist in human experience appear as

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[86] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 328.

[87] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 328.

[88] *Paradox of the World*, 288.

dark and foreboding. Thus, the human inclination is to cling tightly to known certainties of knowledge: as when science makes a claim to possess all knowledge, or when finality is claimed for historical revelation. In fact, more often, consciousness turns away from the unknown and seeks life in the garden of routine, or on the merry-go-round of pleasure. Thus, secular culture has abandoned, as barren, the realm of the unknown; and, to an atheist, the thought of knocking on the door of mystery is a quixotic indulgence. Yet, argues Oman, the greatest joy of the human spirit lies in that unknown land. The hand that knocks on the door of mystery finds a paradox: the discovery that is to be beyond all our dreams is also the fulfilment of our deepest longings. Oman writes:

> All our best possessions come to us as such discoveries. We follow a flutter of white raiment, and are suddenly confronted by the face of our guardian angel. Or the figure in our text, after long weary years of knocking, the door which blankly closed our vista, suddenly opens, and we are filled with the sense of wonder, yet not of strangeness, for while it is utterly different from what we pictured, it is wholly the fulfilment of what we loved without knowing how to desire or pursue. Thus it is with the truth that sets us free, the pardon which gives us peace, the grace which sustains our wills, the faith which encourages our hearts.[89]

In this way, for Oman, prayer rests on the bosom of Divine Providence. It finds peace in reconciliation to God's will, no matter how far that will is beyond human insight. Prayer, to borrow from the words of a medieval mystic,[90] is a piercing of the clouds of unknowing with the darts of longing love. It is the deepest possible engagement with the mystery we call God; and, it is sustained by faith that God will not withhold any good gift from his children. But, it needs to be borne in mind, Oman counsels, that temporal reality may not be adequate to God's best gifts, either being given or being received.

> God, being love, has in store for us what eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived; and we wait on his purpose as we keep knocking at the door of life's mysteries and unrealised possibilities. [Break] In that confidence let us pray – asking, seeking,

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[89] *Paradox of the World*, 290.

[90] *Cloud of Unknowing*, (London: SPCK, 1981).

> knocking – knowing that the blackest door of his seeming denial to be only the barrier that will open upon His fullest manifestation.[91]

The final answers must await the Eschaton. Prayer, therefore, has always to reckon with the mystery of Providence. It must acknowledge what Schleiermacher called "blessings especially bestowed with necessity's hand".[92] The law of necessity is an important concept in Oman's thought as well; it represents unpalatable facts in life and death that we wish were otherwise. In *The Natural and the Supernatural,* Oman deals extensively with the concept of necessity.[93] Necessity, he believes, is not a rival to freedom, but complementary to it. In the economy of God, and in ways beyond human knowing, both necessity and freedom serve a wise and loving Providence. Indeed, comparison of Oman's view of prayer with that of Schleiermacher reveals remarkable similarities. The limitation Providence has placed on human knowledge – even the knowledge of our Lord – is in itself a spur to reliance upon God. Thus, at the heart of prayer is reconciliation to the gracious, though mostly unseen, purposes of God. This deep reconciliation is epitomised in the Saviour's prayer, "not my will but your will be done". Necessity, therefore, is not a barrier to faith, but a doorway to a deeper trust in the inscrutable ways of Providence.

> God has not called us to so high a place as that our wishes should be prophecies; but certainly to something higher than the granting of those wishes should be to us the most precious evidence of his favour.[94]

Prayer, more than anything else, illustrates that freedom is never freedom from the realities of the world, yet it knows a freedom that is not of this world. Oman writes: "Our worth is in our burden and our freedom is in the way we bear it".[95] It is a sentiment foreign to many in contemporary western society, where so many burdens,

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[91] *Paradox of the World*, 291-2.

[92] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On what gives value to life* translated with an Introduction and Notes by Edwina Lawler and Terrance Tice, Schleiermacher Studies and Translations, Volume 14 (Lampter: The Edwin Mellor Press, 1995), Preface, xviii.

[93] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, Part Three, 218-343.

[94] "The Power of Prayer in Relation to Outward Circumstances" Text Matthew 26: 36-46, in Keith Clements, *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Pioneer of Modern Theology* (London: Collins, 1987), 185-194.

[95] *Honest Religion*, 137.

for example, those of health and poverty, have been alleviated; and, burdens that cannot be alleviated are, in many cases, the greatest aid to unbelief. The reverence that waits on the slow ways of God and trusts in the final victory of love belongs somewhere with the "rare breeds" in the show that is modernity.

Summary

Mysticism, in Oman's estimation, represents an attempt to take a short-cut to freedom, via a direct route, avoiding the challenges of life. The challenges of life are, in effect, our deepest learning experiences: both with respect to self-knowledge and knowledge of God. Prayer, in contrast to the short-cut of mysticism, mobilises our response to life, to the call of God in every corner of it. Prayer, for Oman, is the practice of freedom in the soul, in response to God in the world. Indeed, in Oman's understanding of prayer, freedom and its co-ordinates – the holy, the sacred, order and providence – form one personal reality.

Appraisal

In the context of the early twentieth century, Oman did the theological heavy lifting necessary to accommodate reformed theology to the absolute value of personality and to a relational concept of grace. This was a bold and creative achievement. Some of Oman's contemporaries made a vocational move from theology to philosophy. Oman stayed with theology but directed it in a decidedly philosophical direction. Tennant thought that Oman went so far in the direction of revision that his views would be considered heretical. But, his revisionism is part of the genre of liberal Protestantism. Experience is given a place alongside doctrine; and freedom takes precedence over ecclesiastical authority. However, Oman did more to question foundations, historical and doctrinal, than other liberal interpreters of faith. He made a clean break with tradition as authoritative, save in the sense of it being an historical element *in* experience; nothing historical has, in Oman's view, authority *over* experience. This is the most challenging aspect of Oman's theology, not only with respect to grace but also with regard to fundamental questions such as Christology and ecclesiology. As noted in the following chapters, Oman adhered consistently to

the principle of personal freedom regardless of its cost to tradition. It was to Oman gold in the field, to be prized above all else.

Secondly, in every sphere of Oman's thought he maintains the priority of personal, with the result that he offers a holistic theology. He was not content to have an existential theology detached from wider cosmological questions. A theology of persons only makes sense in a world that ultimately honours and guarantees the worth of persons. This protects his theology from some of the criticisms made against liberal theologies that abandoned metaphysics whilst preserving the personal nature of the gospel. The personal nature of cosmology was as fundamental to Oman as the personal reality of grace to the soul; and his personal methodology was the complement of both. Personal freedom is, for Oman, ontologically vouchsafed; this is the faith on which his own independence of thought is predicated. This independence saves Oman from dressing faith in any particular philosophical clothes. For example, nineteenth century theology often identified closely with idealism. In its various hues, idealism was considered a suitable vehicle for the tenets of Christianity in the eyes of many.[96] However, Oman, having freed faith from the theological control of doctrine and confessions, was unwilling to lodge it in the house of a singular philosophy. Oman draws on both empiricism and idealism; the personal is always in the ascendant over either material or spiritual systematisation. One consequence is Oman's literary style. It is a reminder of impressionism in art. His work abounds in free paraphrase; and, above all, it is personal impressions that he seeks to convey to the reader. A systematic theology would seem, for Oman, to be out of place in a world where personal impression is the primary witness to reality and from reality. Oman's theology of personal freedom will not satisfy everyone, but in his emphasis on freedom he escapes the accusation that his theology, like other liberal theologies, was prisoner of any specific philosophical hermeneutic.[97]

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[96] For, example, when one reads the work of a philosopher like Henry Jones, one finds Christianity mediated through absolute idealism. Henry Jones, *Idealism as a Practical Creed* (Glasgow James Maclehose and Sons, 1909).

[97] For example, Ritschl's Kantian ontology and Bultmann's existential hermeneutic.

Thirdly, criticism may be made of Oman's concept of personality on the grounds of its incompleteness. The tripartite focus on will, feeling and intellect has much to commend it as a unified concept of what it is to be a person. However, Oman's definition leaves out what in contemporary understanding is central to the shape and functioning of persons, namely, the sub-conscious. Oman's distinction between disposition and character and the separation of the subconscious from personality is a strange distinction to make for someone whose methodology was empirical and experiential. In contrast to Oman's exclusive focus on conscious personality, James' concept of the "buried self" was indicative of holistic understanding of personality that would become commonplace in the twentieth century. Once the subconscious is taken into account then the idea of personal freedom becomes less idealistic and much more earthed, and the degree of freedom in any life problematic. Of course, Oman never saw freedom as absolute, and devoted considerable effort into finding a place for it in biology and physics, yet it is a puzzling omission that he did not with equal thoroughness consider the psychologically factors that contribute to the degree of freedom in personality. Oman said of Pringle Pattison, he never settled his account with Hegelianism, so it might be said of Oman that he never fully settled his account with Kant. Imaginatively, he set Kant's moral imperatives in an evolutionary context, arguing that experience is too varied to be accommodated to the abstract and absolute. But equally with personality, it calls for a developmental, organic understanding rather than the static categories in which Oman frames it.[98] Even the biblical words such as *heart* and *spirit* invite consideration of the hidden depths of personality. Had Oman focused on the psychological dimensions of personality, it would have tilted his theology more towards compassion and away from the moralistic tone that is sometimes heard in his sub-text, if not in his text. It was an omission born of Oman's antipathy to Hegelian synthesis; perhaps even a reaction to his experience of the Great War. In the early phase of the war, personal responsibility was considered adjectival to the momentous forces that engulfed Europe and an

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[98] Contemporary philosopher Mary Midgley makes a pertinent point with regard to personality: "*The self's wholeness is not, then, the wholeness of a billiard-ball but that of an organism*, a transient, struggling creature which has, of course, its own distinct shape but which still belongs in its own context and background". Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry (London*: Routledge, 2001), 20.

idealistic optimism was appended.[99] Ever after, for Oman, anything that blurred the boundary between the moral self and the world, either inwardly or outwardly, was a danger and a threat.

Fourthly, Oman's aversion to mysticism will always invite criticism. His unease, as noted, arises from a desire to maintain the integrity of personality. Self may be lost as easily in God as in the world. Oman was prepared to concede that mystical experience may function as a discipline for the mind, but not as a substitute for engagement with the world. It is through wrestling with the natural that its depths in the supernatural are known. But, surely, mystical experience need not be evaluated exclusively in epistemological terms. Peace and love pass all understanding. Oman needed to give more weight to his own idea of the undifferentiated holy as "joy unspeakable", not setting it over and against the personal, but recognising it as a depth dimension of personality.[100] Our personal relations have some of their deepest moments of intimacy not in rationality, or in activity, but in our passivity. Passivity, or soulful experience, need not be preparatory for anything; its *raison d'être* is in itself. For Oman, however, it seems as though moments of mystical communion might idle time away that could be devoted to active discipleship. In contrast, personal idealists like Pringle Pattison and Henry Jones with their emphasis on *presence* – God in us as well as us in God – touched on something important in the experience of the divine. Oman failed to appreciate that communion may be real apart from self-determined, self-directed, activities. Without the passivity of mystical experience, in some form, then Christian spirituality can easily mutate into the Protestant work ethic. Hence, secular norms may become so strong within the Church that discipleship is pressed into an entirely activist framework and becomes a

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[99] Rupert Brooke's poem "The Soldier" illustrates the optimism and the idealism that coloured early thinking about the war. The idea of life as "a pulse in the eternal mind" went far to obviate a sense of moral responsibility for such great evil. "The Soldier" in "30 Classic Poems" *Times* November 19th 2011. Oman's hard distinction between disposition and character was born of the intention to affirm moral responsibility *before*, i.e. in the presence of, the *Other*.

[100] Hood comments that interpreters from Farmer to Ward have noticed a tension in Oman's thought between the personal nature of reality and the undifferentiated holy. *Baillie, Oman and Macmurray*, 168. Had Oman not polarised personal identity and the mystical dimensions of the undifferentiated holy – "the joy unspeakable" – then this tension would have been relieved. The joy of the Other bridges the personal and the transcendent. Mystical *presence* may be considered analogous to the personal and transpersonal in sexual experience.

non-contemplative pursuit. In Oman's quest for Christianity predicated exclusively on the conscious, relational, personality he overlooked, or undervalued, the fact that, at some point, relationship must become communion.[101] Nothing short of communion can satisfy either a God of love or the deepest human needs. The mystics remind us of the truth that Milton discovered, when his activity was curtailed and he was in the grip of physical and emotional vulnerability, "They also serve who only stand and wait".[102]

These criticisms of Oman reveal him to be a man of his time. Moral earnestness marked the period after the 1st World war and the importance of personal responsibility seemed a necessary corrective to any form of corporate thinking. Brunner and Barth[103], also, were ardent critics of the mystical dimension to Christianity seeing it as a threat to the personal Otherness of God. Oman's theology, majoring on the personal reality of God, was a creative response to the needs of the hour. However, personality cannot be fitted as neatly into a paradigm of will, feeling and thought as he attempted to locate it. The exclusion of the sub-conscious in Oman's definition of a person mirrors his dismissal of the mystical with respect to God, and so he limits the ways the divine is known and experienced.

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[101] Writing in 1912, Adolf Deissmann in his study of St Paul makes the distinction between the mystical experience of *communio* rather than *unio*. Deissmann argues convincingly that the former variety enables the sanctification – and not the loss of – of the human personality in God. Oman's thinking about mysticism would have profited through engagement with Deissmann. Adolf Deissmann, *Paul: A study in Social and Religious History*, second edition 1927, (New York: Harper, 1957), 147-257. 295ff. Deissmann includes an extensive bibliography on the subject.

[102] Lines from John Milton, "On his blindness", see *The Oxford Book of Verse (1250-1900)* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1919).

[103] Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter* (London: SCM Press, 1964) and Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 319-321.

Chapter Five

Christology: a narrative of freedom

Introduction

The previous chapter examined Oman's view of freedom as development in the evolutionary continuum and a divine gift. As human beings, our vocation is to participate in freedom grounded in love. This participation cannot be explained in purely intellectual terms; the life of freedom through faith, and the life of faith in freedom, can be validated only by authentic living, or praxis. Freedom is multifaceted: it is freedom for new challenges, it is freedom from spiritual coercion; and it is freedom to bear with those things in life which we cannot change. As quoted previous, for Oman "our worth is in our burden; our freedom is in the way we bear it".[1] It is the privilege of human beings to have so evolved that consciously they have entered the atmosphere of freedom, love and knowledge – the spiritual environment that religion calls God.

Of this vocation to a life of freedom in God, Christ is the great exemplar; no one has more authentically lived in the natural, nor has anyone exhibited more the freedom of the supernatural. Jesus of Nazareth in his life, teaching and death is a revelation of how, in the midst of nature, red in tooth and claw, it is possible to find not only reconciliation with God, but joy in God.[2] Jesus shows how the pain of creation, moral evil, and depth of human alienation are transfigured in the light of divine love. In presenting Christ as the one in whom reconciliation to God, and liberation in God, is exhibited, Oman does not draw on the classical Christological tradition; rather, he provides a narrative Christology, descriptive rather than prescriptive, inspirational rather than didactic, more poetic than propositional. It is a narrative, however, set within a larger narrative. Christological revelation is predicated upon the general revelation. God is everywhere revealing himself; though, in Jesus of Nazareth, general revelation is more fully received and reflected. In Christ, we see the Father in

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[1] *Honest Religion*, 137.

[2] "……who for the sake of the joy before him endured the Cross…." Hebrews 12:2.

the fullness of his love and we see humanity in the completeness of response to that love. Oman writes: "Only as the Son of Man does He reveal the perfection of the Son of God".[3] One may speak of a Christology of identity. There is identity between God as he is in Christ and God as he is manifest through the supernatural. Oman, however, is tentative about speaking of God in himself; thus, in regard to the doctrines of the person of Christ, or the Holy Trinity, he considered them speculative and intellectualist.

The identity between God and Christ does not come easy; it is the fruit of reconciliation. This saves Oman's theology from the charge of soft liberalism. Reconciliation has a Cross at its centre and it is the major theme in Oman's reflections on the significance of Christ for Christian faith. The Cross displays the fullest example of reconciliation history can afford; Christ crucified combines the depths of divine love towards the world and a completeness of trusting response never, before or after, witnessed by the world. In the light of the Cross, we can say God "is above all, through all and in all"[4] and is present in a unique, though not exclusive, way in Christ.

Themes in this chapter

The first section examines Oman's Christology in an historical perspective. Oman has been identified, alternatively, as a disciple of Schleiermacher and a follower of Ritschl. These contrasting evaluations of Oman arise out of the unsystematic nature of his work. It is difficult to locate Oman in the Christological spectrum when he, himself, is so critical of systematic presentation. That not withstanding, there is an examine of how previous studies have drawn lines of continuity and discontinuity between Oman and nineteenth century theology, as well as with some strands in the twentieth.

In section two the focus is on the theological premises that shape Oman's Christology. The narrative of revelation in Christ stands within a wider narrative of revelation through creation. Oman sees these as complementary; Christ represents

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[3] *Vision and Authority*, 111.

[4] *Ephesians*: 4:6

clarity and completion of already existent revelation; and practically and functionally he brings the depths of divine reality to view. The philosophical antecedents of this approach will be explored, noting how Oman carried forward a tradition, found in late nineteenth century Scotland, of interpreting Christ within an already determined philosophical framework.[5] The correlation between Christ and freedom is important in Oman's Christology. The supernatural is an order of freedom which Christ embodies and represents; and so, he invites his followers to participate in the same divine order. This Christology of freedom stands out in the context of the early twentieth century; yet, it has been scarcely noticed in theology.

Sections three and four look at Oman's use of and interpretation of the Bible. Section three examines how Oman reads the Bible through the narrative of "prophetic religion"; it is a concept shaped by his philosophy of personality and, *visa versa*, his concept of personality had roots in prophetic literature. Section four considers Oman's reading of the New Testament. Oman's theme of reconciliation strongly colours his use of Christological titles his interpretation of the teaching of Jesus, especially the beatitudes.

Section five examines Oman's theology of the Cross which is, in effect, the background theme of all of his theology. It is a theology that is highly revisionist of tradition, whilst at the same time resolutely affirming of the centrality of the Cross. This section shall argue that Oman's theology of the Cross brings together the various strands in his theological thinking. Oman saw the Cross as the ultimate symbol of reconciliation: the iconic meeting point of human freedom and divine love. The Cross is at the heart of Oman's philosophically mediated Christology.

1 Evaluations in scholarship

Scholarship has found it difficult to locate Oman in the history of Christological thought. All agree that he is far removed from the Chalcedon tradition; but, with

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[5] All Christology, not just that in nineteenth century Scotland, is mediated through some ontological prism: unless one assumes access to a foundational, unconditioned, epistemology. Biblical studies point to cross-fertilization of ideas in the scriptures themselves and the implausibility of an unconditioned stating point. On the other hand – from biblical fundamentalism to the most sophisticated revelational positivism – belief in unconditioned foundations is perennial.

regard to his relation to Christology in the nineteenth century, opinion sharply divides. George Grant's thesis, written in 1950, began a trend in identifying Ritschl's influence on Oman's work. Oman, he writes, "was a man deeply influenced by Ritschl".[6] This estimate was followed in 1969 by Thomas A Langford in his study of English speaking theology in the early twentieth century. Oman's work, he remarks, "though not easily categorised, reflected strong Ritschlian themes".[7] Grant's study draws attention to the points at which Oman follows Ritschl. For example Oman, like Ritschl, is averse to doctrinal metaphysics and endorses Kant's emphasis on human autonomy. However, more needs to be made of the differences between the two thinkers. In the concluding chapter of *Faith and Freedom*, Oman offers considerable criticism of Ritschl. He believed that Ritschl "was beyond question the greatest influence since Schleiermacher";[8] nevertheless, he identified several weaknesses in his theology. First of all, mystery must have a greater role in religion than Ritschl's historicism permits. Christ cannot be a revelation pertaining to historical aspects of reality only; to be relevant to faith in God he must provide "a sense of passing over the infinite".[9] Furthermore, there is a mystery about Christ's death that Ritschl does not sufficiently recognise. It matters greatly, Oman argues, that Christ has conquered death as well as sin and that there is a cosmic dimension to his work. In a way which we shall never be able to adequately explain, there is in atonement "restitution of the moral order as well as of the erring person".[10] With regard to miracle, Oman argues that, if Ritschl had not have been so wedded to a deterministic model of the universe, he would have been more appreciative of the new and unexpected. Ritschl did not sufficiently see the connection between divine freedom and miracle; and had he "set freedom at the heart of things, he could scarcely have avoided a frame of mind to which miracle would hardly have seemed strange".[11] Once the cosmos is understood

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[6] *Collected Works,*292.

[7] Thomas A. Langford, *In Search of Foundations: English Theology, 1900-1920* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 108.

[8] John Oman, "Ritschlianism", *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 11 April 1910, 469-474.

[9] *Faith and Freedom*, 395. I suspect the phrase should read: "a sense of passing over the finite" or "passing over to the infinite", but maybe not !

[10] *Faith and Freedom*, 391.

[11] *Faith and Freedom*, 388.

as a divinely supported and open process, then "miracle is the likeliest of all things in a world so marvellous and God so near".[12] On the question of the resurrection, therefore, Oman is critical of Ritschl for having dealt with it so "elusively".[13] Finally, whilst it has been Ritschl's contribution to make theology a practical rather than a speculative matter, Ritschl's focus on practice led him to undervalue the mystical element in religion. The mystical dimension to faith, Oman argued, cannot be dismissed simply as neo-platonic intrusion.[14]

These are substantial criticisms of Ritschl and should act as a caution against following Grant and Langford in identification of the two thinkers. Over and above these specific divergences, it is important to note that Oman's orientation was fundamentally phenomenological, whilst Ritschl's was historical.[15] Ritschl's concern was to identify the co-ordinate of Christian freedom with historical revelation given in the New Testament. It was a project that was to have a long trajectory into the twentieth century and it was continued, critically, by theologians as diverse as Bultmann and Brunner. Oman, in contrast, sought to free faith from historical authority and to ground in it the present witness of God. Freed from the constraints of history, other than as an element *in* experience, Oman's phenomenological understanding of faith and freedom was more radically existentialist.

Alasdair Heron, writing in 1980, perceived the importance of experience in Oman's thinking and noted a clear continuity with, and development of, the work of

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[12] *Faith and Freedom*, 388.This is an important point which contradicts the assertion by F.W.R Nicol that "miracle is not discussed in Oman's works at all". Obviously, Nichol did not give enough attention to Oman's criticism of Ritschl. See Nichol's article, "John Oman's Theology" in *The Reformed Theological Revue*, xvi (June 1957), 33-44.

[13] *Faith and Freedom*, 389. Grant argues that in *Honest Religion*, Pages 151-2, Oman came to share Ritschl's ambiguity about the resurrection. *Collected Works*, 301. However, I would argue that Grant did not take sufficient cognisance of the realism expressed in Oman's sermons. See "Easter Victory", *A Dialogue with God*, 117-122. Oman's caution was not over the reality of the resurrection, but that it might be understood as evidence of power *apart* from the love displayed on the Cross. Grant does not seem to have consulted Oman's unpublished and voluminous collection of sermons.

[14] *Faith and Freedom*, 393. As we noted in the last chapter, Oman's hostility to mysticism was a qualified hostility, namely to mysticism as *an end in itself*. On the other hand, Oman had a firm belief in mysticism of "ordinary" religious experience. In *Grace and Personality* he writes: mysticism is just another name for religion", 263.

[15] It is interesting that John Macquarrie locates Oman's theology not with neo-Kantians, but with phenomenology and philosophy of spirit.

Schleiermacher. In this, Heron was continuing an older tradition of interpretation of Oman found in Healey. It was in translating the *Speeches* that Healey believes Oman engaged most with Schleiermacher and came to an appreciation of his strengths and weaknesses.[16] Heron repeats the points made by Healey:

> The heritage of Schleiermacher was especially explored and cultivated by Oman….In Schleiermacher, Oman detected three main weaknesses: an inadequate conception of religion, a defective treatment of human freedom and an insufficient appreciation of the causes of disintegration in man and in the world.[17]

These observations touch on key issues. Oman argued that a weakness in Schleiermacher's concept of religion was its rootedness in the thinking of the romantics; and Schleiermacher's understanding of human freedom was endangered by his pantheistic leanings. For example, sin was too lightly portrayed in Schleiermacher's thought, being understood as a defect rather than rejection of God, an artistic rather than a spiritual failure.[18] What Oman sought to bring to Schleiermacher, therefore, was a much stronger sense of personality; in fact, a sense of personality, more indebted to Kant than Schleiermacher, with an emphasis on self-determining agency. Heron, therefore, rightly points out the central place Oman gave to personality. There is, in personality, freedom "to be bad as well as good".[19] Accordingly, Heron believes that Oman countered the facile optimism associated with Schleiermacher and liberal theology. He concludes: Oman's approach "still seems to many a preferable alternative to those of a Barth, a Brunner or a Bultmann".[20] This is a generous assessment from a Barthian scholar; and it rightly addresses the line of continuity between Oman and Schleiermacher whilst, at the same time, noting the greater emphasis on personality.

In 1992, Steven Bevans took a critical look at Oman from a wider perspective; and, though he made the categorical statement: "Oman's work is not Christocentric", he

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[16] *Religion and Reality*, Chapter Two, 14-24.

[17] *Century of Protestant Theology*, 120-121.

[18] *Faith and Freedom*, 237.

[19] *Century of Protestant Theology,* 120.

[20] *Century of Protestant Theology*, 121.

qualified this assertion by saying, it "can certainly be called Christo-morphic". Bevans explains that Christo-morphic was a concept developed by Richard R. Niebhur to describe the practical import of Schleiermacher's Christology. The essential idea is that in Christian faith Christ has a "person forming" function.[21] Bevan's believes the concept is also an apt description of Oman's work, where faith is shaped and sharpened "especially if not exclusively, by knowledge of Jesus Christ".[22] This move towards a more practical understanding of Oman's Christology is helpful, but also limiting. The person-forming aspect of Christ in Oman's thought can be fully appreciated only within the wider perspective of the supernatural. The logic of Oman's thought is that the primary reality is God, as known through experience, and the role of Christ is to act as interpreter. The witness of Christ is not a substitute for the general witness of God; neither does it mean an exemption for us from the work of interpretation. Rather, Christ is inspirational, so that we may know God as we interpret and act in freedom. It is environment in its material and spiritual totality that is the vehicle for God's call and the context of human response. Christ, therefore, shapes personality indirectly, neither removing the responsibility of personal response to God, nor replacing the primary witness of God through creation. In contrast, Niebuhr, following Schleiermacher, gives Christ a much more foundational position in Christian faith; indeed, "personal existence is qualified through and through" by relation to Christ.[23] In Oman's thought, the legacy of Christ is not that of magisterial authority, but of inspiring faith to explore the unfathomable depths of divine love in the midst of life. In his own distinctive terminology, Christ exemplifies and inspires the discovery of the supernatural through the natural.

Summary

These contrasting evaluations of Oman's Christology arise, at least in part, from not giving sufficient recognition to the essentially narrative and unsystematic nature of Oman's work. Oman paints a portrait rather than creates a system. And so, whilst

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[21] *Doctrine of God* , 102.

[22] *Doctrine of God*, 102.

[23] R. R. Niebhur, *Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion* (New York, Scribners,1964), 228.

many points of similarity and difference abound, when we read Oman in the light of the great systematic presentations of his predecessors, this does not mean he can be unambiguously identified with either. The principle that Oman identifies at the heart of reality, namely freedom, informs the way that he approaches theology. Oman feels at liberty to receive light from any quarter and commits himself to no one system. Christ in Oman's theology does not fit into any recognisable framework of doctrine. Oman tells the story of a Christ who brings to the heart the love of God, who challenges the mind with the truth of God and who calls the will to serve God. But this Christ provides no intellectual resting place, rather like the Christ of John's gospel, he "makes his followers free indeed".[24]

The freedom of the theologian, in Oman's view, means engaging with experience; it is the present that is the locus of knowledge of God. The past, of course, is a valuable part of experience and often a needful vantage point. In that sense, the narrative of Christ's life and ministry, of his death and resurrection must not be ignored. It is a beacon directing the believer to the high seas and an assurance that, in obedience to the call to freedom, the disciple can never be outside the fellowship of the Lord. "The highest proof of God's revelation is that it sets men free with the liberty of the children of God".[25] This quotation draws our attention to the underlying theme in Christological thinking: Christ has no finality as an historical revelation in a prescriptive sense; but, in terms of giving to humankind the tools for the life of faith, which is to live in freedom and love, he is unsurpassed. In proverbial language, Christ has taught us to fish rather than having given us a fish. The hermeneutical backdrop to this conclusion is the subject of the next section.

2 Christology and revelation

This section shows how Oman's narrative of Christ completes the wider narrative of God's disclosure in and through the cosmos; and, it leads to consideration of Oman's theology of revelation. God is the primary reality for Oman and the contribution of Christ has been to bring clarification and completeness to what would be otherwise

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[24] John 8: 36.

[25] *Vision and Authority*, 113.

fragmentary knowledge of God. Prior to the coming of Christ, "the idea of God was broken and he made it whole".[26] Christ completes revelation by illuminating the revelation already present, though imperfectly realised. God's revelation always and everywhere abounds and it is human unresponsiveness that marks its limitation. There is, in fact, "no such thing as an historical revelation".[27] Mere "information by sporadic acts of omniscience" is not worthy of the term "revelation" in that it ignores the essential dialogue that is fundamental to knowledge of God. Oman's view of revelation, therefore, echoes God's word to Isaiah: "come now let us reason together";[28] but, importantly, the possibility of such dialogue is universal and is a reality where there are ears to hear, or eyes to see. Oman continues:

> A God of love must be revealing in all his intercourse, at all times and in all ways and not alone in special actions. The love of God and the fellowship of the Spirit are always and everywhere revealing themselves, and to restrict themselves to special channels would merely prove the love imperfect and the fellowship narrow hearted.[29]

It is, therefore, within the universal that the particularity of Christ takes on importance. The urgent need is for an interpreter of God's generous giving of himself through creation. The need is for a translator to give human voice to the language of God that speaks in and shines through creation.

> The whole world is the means whereby God manifests Himself, and our supreme need is an interpretation and standard of this self manifestation.[30]

Christ meets this supreme need for interpretation and a standard of revelation. In Christ, the revelation of God, given in and through the world, finds a *human* voice.

This leads to the question of the identity between Christ and God. It is important to Oman that the voice of Christ does not take on an independent authority. The authority of Christ's witness comes from its unity with the witness of God, mediated

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[26] *Grace and Personality*, 155.

[27] *Grace and Personality*, 164.

[28] Isaiah 1:18 AV, or "Come let us argue it out" NRSV.

[29] *Grace and Personality*, 164.

[30] "Ritschlianism", *Journal of Theological Studies*, Volume XI, 1910, 472.

through creation. There are not two witnesses but one. Oman highlights this in *The Natural and the Supernatural*:

> If Jesus is in any sense a final authority in religion, it is because he spoke entirely as a witness from this reality, and not by any authority apart from it.[31]

And he repeats in *Honest Religion*:

> He spoke with the authority of truth manifest to all who did not meet its appeal with hypocrisy; and He neither used authorities nor was one.[32]

Thus, Oman comes to a theology of identity between revelation in Christ and revelation given in and through the natural world. And, though he does not favour the classical formulation of the Word becoming flesh, the person of Christ in Oman's theology is functionally at one with God. This functional identity is so much so that Oman says we must always go directly to Christ as the human embodiment, or incarnation, of the Divine.

> If the Christ of God is not one who proclaims truth altogether above our reasoning, but is the perfect appeal of the Divine incarnated in humanity which demonstrates itself direct to the nature made in God's image, the first resolve of every disciple in every age is to press, without intermediary directly to his feet. No fellow mortal even were he an Apostle should intervene.[33]

It would be a mistake, therefore, to say that Oman has no doctrine of the incarnation. It is not the classical doctrine, of the *logos* becoming flesh. Oman's doctrinal agnosticism does not permit him to go in that direction. Nevertheless, Christ in his relation of trust towards God, and by his vocation as a witness to the reality of God, does, functionally, "incarnate" the divine in humanity.[34] It is an incarnation of

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[31] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 468.

[32] *Honest Religion*, 157.

[33] *Vision and Authority*, 193.

[34] One could make the case that God is incarnate in Christ in an *economic* sense though not an *ontological* sense. This idea is expressed by Alfred E. Garvie in *The Christian Faith*, (Duckworth: London, 1936), 138. However, Garvie argues that the idea, though satisfying "for most believers", does not go far enough metaphysically. For Oman, on the other hand, the *economic* incarnation of God in Christ describes a limit beyond which he will not go. Grant quotes H.H. Farmer as saying that Oman wrote in a leaflet preparatory to some services for students at the close of the 1914-1918 war: "At the centre of my faith is the thought that God was in Christ (in a way that I do not care to attempt to define) reconciling the world to himself". Grant concludes: "It expresses in clear cut form that

completion which, in turn, offers the hope of a practical incarnation of the divine in every person. This, of course, given Oman's relational anthropology can come about only through personal relationship and never by the infusion of the Spirit or by sacramental in-dwelling. We may say that Oman provides a functional and relational Christology, outwith a dogmatic structure and within a narrative framework.

2.1 Contextual roots

If we take a brief contextual look at Oman's integrationist approach to theism and Christology, we find that it takes us back to that of the late nineteenth century and we need look no further than his teachers in philosophy to see antecedents to his methodology. For example, two of his University of Edinburgh teachers, Campbell Fraser and Pringle Pattison, understood Christian revelation from a general theistic view point. Both alike saw Christ as one who brings clarity to the idea of God. Furthermore, the notion that Christology and general revelation stand in a dialectical relation was an idea far from their intellectual horizon. Thus, Pringle Pattison, could say towards the end of his Gifford Lectures, 1911-1913, that the gospel of Christ is in effect the "open secret" of the universe. He writes:

> What was the secret of Christianity, the new interpretation of life by which it conquered the world? The answer is in a sense common place. It was the lesson of self sacrifice; of life for others, precisely through which, nevertheless, the truest and intensest(sic) realisation of self is to be attained – in the Pauline sense, dying to live, in the words of Jesus losing one's life to find it. [Break] For if this is the deepest insight into human life, must we not also recognise it as the open secret of the universe.[35]

For Pringle Pattison, the significance of Christ lies in his articulation of the "open secret", the revelation ready and waiting to be discovered. This concept of revelation as clarification is also evident in the thinking of Campbell Fraser. Fraser reflected in his Gifford Lectures (1894-96) that "the universe is virtually personal, for us a revelation of a Person rather than a Thing".[36] As observed in chapter four, Fraser,

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agnosticism about the ontological status of Our Lord that is always present in varying degree throughout his writing". *Works*, 309.

[35] *Idea of God*, 410-411.

[36] *Philosophy of Theism*, 251.

like Oman, believed that the universe is both natural and supernatural and on speaking terms with humanity. In his monograph on Berkeley, Fraser maintains there is a "revelation of the Universal Spirit in the Cosmos and in Christ".[37] In fact:

> The *more articulate* revelation of the Universal Spirit in and through Christ ultimately appeals to the same inevitable presuppositions out of which the optimistic theistic faith in the moral and prefect goodness of the supreme power emerges.[38]

Fraser, committed as he was to the historic Christian faith, does not feel a need to relegate general revelation to a subordinate position. It is a mistake, he believed, to think that "Divine love can only come through a miraculous revelation".[39] General and Christological revelation converge and complement each other. In his *Biographica Philosophica* he wrote:

> The more vague gospel of Theistic Philosophy and the more articulate gospel of *essential* Christianity may respond to one another, each particularly confirmed by the response.[40]

The continuity between Oman and his teachers is striking; and, together, they represent a particular way of thinking theologically. Christ does not speak into a spiritual vacuum, but to human consciousness already cognisant of divine reality. Indeed, it is a forlorn hope, Oman believed, that one should see revelation in Christ if one is unable to observe the presence of God in humanity. "We cannot recognise the Divine things of God without first recognising their presence in man".[41] And, more polemically still, he argues:

> It is unbelief which cannot see God in all things, the unbelief which sets God and his creation at variance, the unbelief which finds God's revelation of himself by His words alien and opposite from his revelation of Himself by his works."[42]

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[37] *Berkeley and Spiritual Realism*, 80-81.

[38] *Berkeley and Spiritual Realism*, 80-81. (Italics mine).

[39] *Biographical Philosophica*, 326.

[40] *Biographical Philosophica*, 308. The italics are, in this instance, Fraser's.

[41] *Vision and Authority*, 56. compare, 1st John 4:20.

[42] *Vision and Authority*,74.

As well as having the support of the Bible for this assertion that God is known through his works,[43] Oman's integration of Christology into a general theistic narrative is an example of how the theistic philosophy common in the late nineteenth century extended into the early twentieth.

2.2 The finality of freedom

A Christology of completion brings with it the question of finality. Does Christ complete natural revelation as well as complement it? For Oman, there can be no completion of revelation in an evolving universe where human insight is so limiting and the propensity to err so great. The finality that Christ brought, therefore, lies in another direction. It is in the freedom that he exhibited. For example, there are many aspects of Jesus' message that stand in continuity with the Old Testament, but, in the freedom of his life and witness, Christ stands unique.

> How great the Old Testament revelation of God was appears in the way Jesus started from it; and how great His revelation of the Father was appears in how far it went beyond what was reached by even the greatest of the prophets.[44]

Jesus, in proclaiming the Kingdom, or rule of God, directs us to an eternal order in which "power will be content with nothing but the rule of freedom, bound only by love and directed only by holiness".[45] It is Oman's conviction that the rule of freedom is primary and Christ stands out as unsurpassed in his emphasis upon it and in his embodiment of it. Oman writes, in the concluding pages of his Kerr lectures, that revelation exists as "God's response to man's aspiration after freedom" and it is human aspiration and God's concern to satisfy it that takes us to Christ. It is in Christ that the human desire for freedom and divine provision are perfectly joined.

> Jesus speaks with a directness and a simplicity to the hearts made in God's image, and meets them so entirely on the basis of their human

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[43] One need only think of the psalms or the parables for confirmation of natural revelation. For a stout defence of natural revelation in the Bible and in the Westminster Confession of Faith, see James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the hope of immortality* (London: SCM, 1992); also, James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991).

[44] *Honest Religion*, 71.

[45] *Vision and Authority*, 339.

> needs, that he stands quite alone in his significance for our freedom in the children of God.[46]

This perfect union of human desire and divine satisfaction of that desire "at once shows the necessary relation of all revelation to Christ and the necessary subordination of it to the revelation in Him". [47] It is a paradoxical finality that Oman attributes to Christ. The authority of Christ is predicated upon the freedom he embodied: freedom that, in the evolutionary chain, became conscious in human beings and has come to an unsurpassable level in Christ. One cannot speak of greater freedom to come because the principle has been demonstrated to the fullest capacity possible. But still, the principle awaits eschatological realisation in creation as a whole and in human beings in particular. One might argue that Oman gives freedom Christological underpinning. Christ embodied divine freedom to a unique degree; in this respect he is what Campbell Fraser called the "Ideal man".[48]The freedom of Christ in his life and death, therefore, brings a transparency to the freedom possible in divine-human relations, and at no time before, or since, has the world been so diaphanous to the divine than in the divine love and human freedom manifest in Christ. Oman could assent to the exclusiveness of Matthew's gospel when it says: "no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone whom the Son chooses to reveal him". But again, for Oman, this is a practical exhortation rather than a dogmatic affirmation. Only through praxis can the uniqueness of Christ come home to faith.

> The mystery is open for godliness, not for speculation. Not as we discuss the divine and the human, but as we attain to the image of God which is the ideal of human nature, does its perfect manifestation in Christ receive its demonstration. The assurance that He and the Father are one requires endeavour to conform our perverse wills to this harmony. The proof that the Son came from the bosom of the Father to declare him unto us depends on whether, with the spirit of sons, we are reaching up towards knowledge of the Father.[49]

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[46] *Faith and Freedom*, 415.

[47] *Faith and Freedom*, 415.

[48] *Theism*, 139-153.

[49] *Vision and Authority*, 234.

But, even when the significance of Christ as a revelation of God comes home to faith, practically and existentially, the line of demarcation between heaven and earth is not erased. Agnosticism with regard to what lies beyond experience is, for Oman, not a limit to revelation to be regretted. It is a divine limit that is the necessary corollary of humility. In his own words:

> ….we can discern – and, not then after the way of speculation, but after the way of faith, which however is the way of large vision of love – something of the ways and thoughts which are high as the place from which it is not given to any of us to look down, but to which it is given to all of us to look up.[50]

In Oman's theology Socratic unknowing is as vital as knowing and freedom is the mean between them. Freedom, so conceived, cannot but walk the humble way upon which truth and life depend. Christ's finality inheres in his freedom and his freedom attests his finality. Oman comments: "at any time in history when we meet with freedom, we meet with what is final".[51] In a real sense: *Ubi libertas ibi Christus.*

In the context of the twentieth century, Oman offered an alternative Christology and understanding of revelation to that of neo-orthodox theologians. It was a theology that stood in critical continuity with modernity. Garrett Green sums up the continuing impact of modernity as follows:

> …the great problems of theology and modernity will continue to challenge religious thinkers of the twenty first century: the relationship of religious faith to modern science, the historical particularity of the Bible, the authority of Scripture, the proper use of philosophy on theology, the truth of Christianity in a pluralistic world – and many others whose shape we can only begin to imagine.[52]

Oman addressed all of these questions; indeed, they were the burden of his work; and, yet, he has received little attention. For Oman, the intellectual questions thrown up by modernity cannot be circumvented by claiming a vantage point immune from them. There is only a subjective standpoint in theology. Nor is it adequate simply to

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[50] *Vision and Authority*, 235.

[51] *Freedom and Authority*, 413-14.

[52] "Modernity" by Garrett Green in Gareth Jones, edited, *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004),178.

take refuge in *who* Christ is; apart from the question of the *how* of revelation. Oman, therefore, sought to honour the critical questions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; they arose out of experience and had to be addressed within the field of experience. It was with a degree of bemusement that Oman questioned the confident Barthian dismissal of experience as the sphere of revelation.

> Much of the criticism of the school is true and they have done much to clear the ground. I am not learned in their works and do not know all that is maintained, but the effort so far seems to leave more of a quagmire than before. Schleiermacher is denounced as the high priest of error. Ever since his day Protestant theology has wandered in the quagmires of emotion and not found objective God-given truth. This is preached with prophetic fire. But when you come to ask: what is God-given truth, and what is *Das Wort Gottes* which is the supreme truth, and how do we know it is God's word?; so far as I have read, the writers clothe themselves in vagueness and become abusive.[53]

Oman was sixty-nine years of age at the time of writing and had spent his academic life articulating a theology that does not abandon experience but claims it as the sphere of revelation. Whereas Barth reserves one corner of history as the place of privileged breakthrough to the ultimate,[54] Oman posited a universal revelation mediated through the natural, though always above it and beyond cultural domestication. Barth's fears of cultural Christianity are exorcised in Oman's work by a reverent agnosticism and a sense of the Other that calls all experience to account. As to why British and English speaking theology should have been more captivated by a Barthian trajectory in the mid-twentieth century, it is a difficult question to answer. Perhaps the imagined certainty of revelation predicated on a privileged corner of history will always appeal to human insecurities. But, for Oman, the freedom of faith is the important and essential matter.

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[53] "Schleiermacher" Review of *Die Christliche Glaube* by John Oman in *Journal of Religious Studies*, Volume 30 (1929), 401-5.

[54] For discussion of this point, see Joseph S. O'Leary, "Religions as Conventions" in Graham Ward, edited, *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 413-424; especially Page 420.

Summary

This section has argued that Oman understood Christ within a general theistic narrative. Christ clarifies the omnipresent revelation that humanity sees only imperfectly. Oman rejects the classical doctrine of the incarnation; but, on the other hand, he arrives at a functional, relational and incarnational understanding of the divine presence in Jesus. For Oman, this is not separable from the divine in every person. All are made in the image of God, but in Jesus that image shines more clearly and more brightly.

Oman's Christological reflection stands in continuity with the philosophical presuppositions of his teachers in accommodating Christology to theism. Campbell Fraser and Pringle Pattison saw revelation in Christ as completion of natural revelation and saw the relationship to religion as prophetic and progressive rather than dialectical. The latter perspective was going to have to wait for another day, though Kierkegaard had already given it voice.

It is in the freedom of life and witness that Oman finds the uniqueness of Christ. He witnessed to the eternal order of freedom, he lived a life of freedom and he is the inspiration of all who follow him to realise in their own experience a measure of that same freedom. The finality of Christ is predicated on his freedom with respect to the natural, that is the world; and with respect to the supernatural, that is with respect to previously held beliefs about the holy and the sacred. This theology of freedom and its attendant personal, inter-subjective, understanding of revelation – and of Christ within the orbit of universal revelation – failed to capture the imagination of most twentieth century theology.

3 Oman's use of the Bible

Given the location of revelation in experience, it might be thought that this marginalises the use and importance of the Bible. However, this was not Oman's intention. Whilst the Bible is not the final arbiter in belief, it is an indispensible witness to faith. The Bible belongs in the stream of experience, informing but not dictating, illuminating but not over-riding personal insight. Somewhat analogous to the servant role of Christ in informing Christian faith, the Bible comes to us as a

valuable spiritual legacy, not to bind the believer to the past, but to be of practical aid in the present and to inspire for the future.[55] In other words, the Bible is part of a *continuing* narrative, a narrative can be traced to antiquity and which will be complete only in the eschaton. For Oman, this is not an *a priori* assertion, as with positivist theologies of revelation; it is a conviction born of the nature of the religious narrative itself. This point becomes clearer through an examination of Oman's concept of prophetic religion.

3.1 The hermeneutic of prophetic religion

Hermeneutics is a wide subject. Lutherans approach scripture through the doctrine of justification by faith, Barth through the lens of classical Christology and liberation theologians through the Marxist critique of capitalism. Oman's hermeneutical lens was that of prophetic religion. This should not be understood simply as the religion of the prophets. The concept of prophetic religion refers to the living response of humanity to the supernatural. In an evolutionary continuum, religious sensibility has no resting place; the rich, diverse and unfathomable nature of our spiritual environment means that there will always be new insight, adaption, adjustment and change. Where the prophetic spirit manifests itself, things that were done in the name of religion for centuries will never be done again; and things once thought beyond the pale and taboo become new, sacred imperatives. The prophetic principle, therefore, is animated by the holy and the sacred and the transcendence of these beyond any fixed expression. Oman reads the Bible and interprets the world of religion from this ever moving, evolutionary perspective. Prophetic insight is at the apex of humanity's religious development and Christ is unsurpassed as one endowed with the prophetic spirit.

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[55] With regard to confessional theology, Oman's experiential interpretation of the Bible represents a critical discontinuity with tradition. The Westminster Divines gave final authority not to the words of scripture *verbatum*, but to the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture. Chapter One of the Confession reads: "The supreme Judge, by which all controversies in religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of the ancient writers, doctrines of men and private spirits, are to be examined and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other than the Holy Spirit speaking in the scripture". Oman, however, radicalises the confession's concept in setting the Spirit of God over and above scripture itself. The authority of experience takes priority over the authority of tradition.

This theology of religion is spelt out in detail in the last part of *The Natural and the Supernatural,* where Oman is aware of the subjectivity of his perspective. However, he argues, there is no alternative but to start from one's own personal commitment. "It is merest illusion to think that we can transfer ourselves to some absolute standpoint or do more than look from the highest standpoint we can reach with our best equipment of knowledge, experience and ability."[56] Besides, thinking issues through from a personal standpoint, rather than presumed objectivity, has a better chance of bringing one's own views under criticism and to "a readiness to alter them should new light on them require it".[57] The end result may well be a new allegiance. However, whilst we may aspire to progress, and civilisations may make some slow advance, we must not assume superiority over the past. Oman makes some very cogent criticisms of western assumptions about earlier civilisations.

> There are baser and more degrading civilised idolatries than fetishism; there are among us economic injustices more unjust and in the end more brutal than among head hunters; savage promiscuity is not as vile a market of human beings as civilised prostitution. The noble savage of the eighteenth century has had the guilt rubbed off by greater familiarity with his ways, yet our larger life provides, if not grosser materialism, something more unnatural and debasing: and perhaps the savage has nothing to teach us about selfishness or evil dexterity.[58]

It is to this ambiguous world where the first shall be last, and the last shall be first, that the Bible comes as a witness to God. The prophetic principle reads the Bible not as a sacred text to stifle all rivals, but as a servant text that can inform about the road already travelled and give hints as to the way ahead. Furthermore, the prophetic premise may be used to classify religion, though the resulting categories are never water-tight. With this caveat, Oman classifies religion under the headings: primitive, polytheistic, mystical, ceremonial-legal and prophetic.[59] However, there is no clear-

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[56] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 358-59.

[57] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 359.

[58] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 359. This quotation reveals how far off the mark Arthur Davis is in his comment: " Oman, like many of the thinkers of his day, was left by default with liberal progress. He ended up being too easily reconciled with contemporary liberal civilisation" Introduction to Grant, *Works*, 162. Reconciled to liberal civilization Oman was not; only if liberal values come under the transcendent critique of God is there, in Oman's eyes, any hope for civilisation.

[59] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, Part Four, 372-471.

cut, or unambiguous, line of progression; and, the highest forms of religion may contain elements of the lowest. Prophetic religion is a principle greater than that which can be contained in any one religion. At the same time, there are particular flowerings of that principle throughout history. The monotheism of the Hebrew prophets represented such a flowering.

3.2 From prophetic religion to personalism

Oman places his discussion of the prophets and prophetic religion at the closing section of his *magnum opus*, his most philosophical work. We find, therefore, a direct line that stretches from his wrestling with epistemology and ontology to his discussion of prophetic religion. The result is that Oman makes a close identification between the mind and method of the Old Testament prophets and his own painstakingly, worked out, theory of knowledge. To recall, the core of Oman's philosophy of religion is that the supernatural is known through right use of the natural; and the supernatural provides the meaning of the natural. Further to this, the supernatural is essentially personal and an order of freedom. God in his love will not override human insight; indeed, it is what he will always nurture. The prophets, for Oman, personify this personal relationship between God and humanity. They represent the "spiritual ancestry" to which we must be faithful, and we can be faithful to our spiritual ancestry only as we are resolutely independent in our own thinking.

> We must all build on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, on the foundation of those who obeyed the call and recognised the Divine teaching. To be faithful to our own insight, it must be our constant endeavour to be faithful to our spiritual ancestry[Break]To be true to our spiritual descent means to be true to our spiritual fellowship; and the higher our own endeavour, the more we know its dependence upon the good and the faithful.[60]

In this way, Oman reads the prophets within a continuing narrative; they are links in a living spiritual tradition that stretches to the present.

It is a long step from the historical circumstances of the Hebrew prophets to Oman's philosophy of the natural and the supernatural. Oman is open to the criticism that he

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[60] *Vision and Authority*, 90.

too readily identified the struggles of the ancient past with the idealism of modernity and, in effect, made the prophets in the image of his own personal realism. A general criticism of this nature has been made with respect nineteenth biblical scholarship by contemporary Old Testament scholar Hans M. Barstad; he points out that German idealism so influenced scholars that "prophets appear almost as "protestant" theologians who invent an ethically superior religion".[61] Robert R. Wilson, however, whilst endorsing the view that nineteenth century scholars were strongly influenced by philosophical idealism, argues that the view of the prophets as "advocates of high moral and theological values"[62] is old, with roots in Second Temple Judaism. Indeed, there is something perennial in the view of the prophets as personalists and ethical idealists. Wilson reminds his readers that appeal to the prophets as proto-personalists has "survived deep into the twentieth century in the work of scholars such as Martin Buber, Abraham Heschel and Yehezkel Kaufmann, among others".[63]

Oman is amongst the twentieth century thinkers who interpreted the prophets within a personalist paradigm. However, Oman did not press the prophets into an *a priori* ethical framework: that would have been to betray his methodology. Rather, he sought to recognise in the prophets ethical beginnings that would be later deepened and broadened, particularly by Jesus of Nazareth. Nor did the prophetic principle end with Jesus; it is an enduring feature of spiritual life. For Oman, therefore, the relation between the prophets and the idea of personality is not one of projection from the present to the past; it is a relationship marked by development from embryonic beginnings to a fuller realisation of the personal nature of reality. In other words, the philosophy of personality may be traced back to biblical roots.[64] Perhaps, for this

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[61] Hans M. Barstad, *A Brief Guide to the Hebrew Bible*, translated Rannfrid Thelle (Louisville, TN: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 101. See also, "Current issues in the Study of the Old Testament" in John Kaltner and Louis Stulman, *Inspired Speech* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 38-48.

[62] *Inspired Speech*, 38.

[63] *Inspired Speech*, 38.

[64] Oman owes much to John Skinner for his personal and relational interpretation of Hebrew prophecy. He acknowledges his debt to Skinner in the Preface to *The Church and the Divine Order*, viii. Skinner was an Old Testament scholar with an international reputation who came to Westminster College in 1880 and became principal in 1907. Of the personal and corporate nature of Hebrew prophecy, Skinner wrote: "The religion represented by the prophets is one in which the God of conscience enters into personal relations not with the individual directly but with the community…to

reason, Oman never uses the modern term "personalism" with regard to his work, or to that of others.[65] In *Grace and Personality,* Oman's definition of personality, in terms of self-determination, self-direction and self-consciousness, is taken from Calderwood but is ultimately Kantian in origin. But, even older than the Enlightenment heritage is the biblical. In an article, written in 1906, Oman maintains that the idea of personality is ultimately rooted in the Bible. He writes: "The Christian concept of the individual…. didn't descend from heaven without any indication of its coming".[66] The germ of individuality may be observed in Greek philosophy with its growing clarity of the "importance of man to himself;"[67] but, to Oman's mind, the concept owes much more to Hebrew prophecy.

> The very mark of the true prophet was to hear God's voice only and not man's and to be true to the individuality God had given him.[68]

True individuality, therefore, is not the individual living in isolation or autonomy. Individuality is the individual before God. The prophetic consciousness found in Israel was, Oman believed, the *beginning* of a spiritual individualism that we would identify as personality.

The prophetic principle – or equally one may speak of spiritual evolution – is seminal to Oman's theology. The prophets were not simply ethical idealists before their time; they were rooted in their history and spoke from the particularity of circumstance. Oman's bi-polar theology of the empirical and the ideal, of the natural and the supernatural spares him any a-historic presentation of prophecy. Continuity, for Oman, is not the continuity of an unbroken line in history, it is the continuity of

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say this is not to deny that the Old Testament contains anticipations of the perfect relationship in which God speaks directly to the heart of the individual….." John Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion: Studies in the life of Jeremiah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 7. "Anticipations" is the key word: the prophets were not modern ethicists.

[65] "Personalism" was a well established term at the time when Oman was writing. It was particularly established in the United States through the work of Borden Parker Bowne and Albert C. Hudson; see *The Philosophy of Personalism*, Albert C. Knudson (New York, Abingdon, 1927).

[66] "Individual" in *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, edited by James Hastings with the assistance of John A. Selbie and John C. Lambert (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1906), 814-816. Oman contributed two further articles to the same volume: "Individualism," 816-817 and "Individuality", 819-821.

[67] "Individual", 814.

[68] "Individual", 814.

the personal spiritual environment in which human beings live at all times and places. History, indeed pre-history in the form of archaeology, is a record of human adaption to the spiritual reality that bears creation in its bosom. It is a bearing of love, both honouring of freedom and ever calling the things that are not into existence. Continuity, therefore, comes from above rather than below; and knowledge, ancient and biblical, modern and philosophical, ultimately coheres in one personal, transcendent reality. Oman writes:

> Yet the worst fault of all the – ologies – Christology, Pneumatology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology and the rest is that they isolate and divide what should be one in itself and the source of unity in all.[69]

An anecdote illustrates Oman's conviction that all knowledge ultimately coheres in one personal reality. A questioner at a series of lectures Oman gave at Auburn Theological Seminary, New York, in 1907, accused him of theological reductionism. The title of the series was "Foundations of Belief". A report on the lectures in the *Semi-Weekly Journal* informed the readers, that Oman's manuscript for his lecture "The Authority of Christ" had been stolen! and a member of the audience commented: "I am glad you have left us a personal God anyway, you have taken about everything else away".[70] The questioner was perceptive. Knowledge, for Oman, is grounded in the personal reality of God and known through freedom, love and holiness. His consistent belief was that knowledge, historically conditioned, fragmentary in nature, sometimes mistaken, always in need of revision, is the medium for the transcendent, that is, for the God of love who honours the human search for knowledge and the human longing for goodness.

Summary

This section has shown us that Oman took the Bible seriously, but not as an historical revelation in place of experience; rather, the Bible belongs in the stream of experience, an important reference point to the way we have travelled and an inspiration for the future. The Spirit, or supernatural, takes precedence over historical

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[69] *Honest Religion*, 155.

[70] A copy of the Auburn Semi-Weekly report is in the Oman archive at Westminster College, Cambridge. WT/1/16-19.

claims to authority. The Spirit speaks in scripture *and* it is lord over scripture. This view of the Bible is predicated on the idea that religion is a living relationship with God and that it will always be prophetic: challenging, adjusting and adapting in its nature. Religion adapts to the environment of the supernatural; or, in biblical language, religion lives as it adapts to the constant call of God. Without constant response to God, religion fossilises into tradition which, for Oman, should never be dismissed because it may be the only guide and witness left when the voice of God is no longer heard.[71]

Oman looks back to the prophets through the lens of his epistemology and theology of the natural and the supernatural. Oman argues for continuity from the past to present, in that he believes that the ideas of individuality and personhood owe much to the prophetic experience of being an individual in the presence of God. And so, whilst it is true that Oman gives the prophets a personalist colouring, he also traces personalism to biblical roots. Of course, if reality is personal, as Oman is insistent it is, one would expect such trajectories and continuities. Oman's use of the Bible, his idea of prophetic religion and his personalist hermeneutic cannot be divorced from his philosophical commitment to personal realism.

4 New Testament Christology

Oman wrote considerably on the subject of the New Testament especially with regard to the apocalyptic. This aspect of his work is taken in the next chapter. For now, attention is turned to Oman's interpretation of the Christological titles applied to Jesus in the New Testament and his interpretation of the teaching of Jesus as found in the beatitudes and parables.

4.1 Christological titles

Oman shows no interest in the historical origins or etymology of the titles given to Christ. As with the prophets, it is what Jesus reveals of the mind of God that matters; and the Christological titles are of value only as they further faith in the personal,

[71] Freedom is a burdensome task and God does not impose the whole weight of it upon us at once. Wherefore he appoints a statutory element in life and religion to be a substitute for freedom when men are weary of it and a discipline when they misuse it. *Faith and Freedom,* 418.

loving reality of God. For Oman, there are three titles applied to Jesus in the New Testament that are of particular importance; these titles highlight the vocation of Christ, which was to reveal the mind of God and to illustrate how we may come into accord with it. Oman reflects on these titles in *Honest Religion*.[72]

First of all, the term "Christ" has an "intimate connection" to the idea of the Kingdom, or rule of God. By means of his teaching, and the manner of his "living and dying", Jesus has given us a picture of that rule. It is a rule of love which, in the spirit of Hosea, patiently bears our sins and failures so "that it may make us sons of God in His freedom".[73] The title "Christ" is intimately connected not just to the Kingdom but to the Cross. The idea of the Kingdom of God, Oman maintains, if isolated from the Cross, quickly takes on worldly dimensions of might and dominion. The Cross is the window into God's being, and there we see a heart of love that is non-coercive, a love that longs for humanity to be reconciled, to come home to the Father's house. Neither, as we shall see below, does the Cross carry with it any connotation of "compensation to God", as if God needs to be reconciled. This "is just a harking back to the old religion of fear, which the commendation of God's love on the Cross was to cast out."[74]

Secondly, the term "Lord" supplements the meaning of "Christ". Whereas, Christ, the "anointed one", reveals to us the nature of God's rule, Jesus the "Lord" reveals how we may experience that rule. It becomes our experience as we share in our Lord's freedom and victory over the world. The paradox, however, is that, to be free, we must bring every thought into captivity to Christ as Lord. This requirement for total obedience is, paradoxically, the source of individuality and freedom. For this reason, Jesus "objects to being called Lord".[75] What Jesus requires is that we offer the same "kind of obedience to God as His". When we consider Jesus' own

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[72] *Honest Religion*, 95-102.

[73] *Honest Religion*, 98.

[74] *Honest Religion*, 99. The subordination of wrath to love shows the continuity of Oman's thinking with both Schleiermacher and Ritschl. However, Schleiermacher's determinism led him to a universalist position, whilst Ritchl retained wrath as an eschatological concept. For discussion of these positions and the wider question of wrath, see Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith*,134-137 and 535-537.

[75] *Honest Religion*, 99.

obedience to God we can never doubt the radical freedom that accompanies it. This radical freedom is our highest calling and it becomes a personal reality if we pursue it with faithfulness and diligence. Jesus as Lord sets us free because he was:

> ….the most independent of all thinkers, the greatest of all innovators and the most calmly heroic of all conquerors [break] nor has he lacked followers who have found, just in his obedience, deliverance from custom, convenience and subjection to human opinions and human authority.[76]

Of course, without the revelation of God as love, the obedience upon which freedom is predicated will be beyond the reach of frail humanity. Insight into God's unfailing love and generous grace are the prerequisites of obedience. And so, the third term, "Son", describes the unity of love and obedience in the life of Jesus and in the lives of his followers.

In Oman's theology, the term "Son" captures the essence of the other two titles. It is by being perfectly the Son that Jesus manifests both the Father's rule of love and human reconciliation to that love. The Son, being reconciled to the Father in and through the Cross, becomes the inspiration of reconciliation for everyone who hears the gospel. Oman, as noted, interprets Christ in functional and relational terms. The son-ship of Christ "was neither physical nor metaphysical, but is a relation to God through which He was sure of revealing the heart of the Father and of all things being given Him of the Father that he needed".[77] The son-ship of Christ, however, was not just a vertical relationship with God. It is a horizontal relationship with humanity whereby Jesus stands in solidarity with all God's sons and daughters. Jesus was not the son of God in any selfish or exclusive way. His son-ship was perfect, not in being isolated from humanity but through being indentified with humanity in its alienation from God. Jesus' son-ship was, in fact, no different from ours "except in originality"; it is son-ship that we all "ought to have".[78] And we do have that filial relation, when we come to have the mind of Christ and come to share with him a sense of the Father's love. In his unbroken intimacy with God and deep solidarity

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[76] *Honest Religion*, 100.

[77] *Honest Religion*, 101.

[78] *Honest Religion*, 101.

with humanity, Christ both stands in the tradition of the prophets and surpasses them. The prophets experienced "bitter contrast" between the world around them and the experience of God in their "inward promptings". But with Christ, all things worked together for God and the "light of God's infinite purpose of love" ever shone upon his soul, and so, with us too, we can enter "this fellowship, divine and human".[79]

In this manner, Oman put selected New Testament titles for Jesus into the service of his theology. A similar criticism to that invoked with regard to his appeal to the Old Testament prophets may be made. On the one hand, Oman's use of Christological titles is not alien to their meaning in the New Testament or in the Christian tradition. The work of Christ is one of reconciliation. On the other hand, Oman gives the terms Christ, Lord and Son an exclusively personal meaning. He sets aside much of the historical nuance and depth of meaning that biblical scholarship unearths. Consequently, his interpretation of New Testament terminology will not be satisfying to many readers. At least two sets of reader will find Oman's interpretation inadequate. First, those who find the New Testament a fertile ground for faith precisely because of its diversity, inconsistencies and loose ends will want to dig more deeply. This is the type of faith that lives with the search for the Jesus of history, not as a problem, but as a liberation and inspiration. Secondly, those who value the coherence that Trinitarian theology brings to the diversity of the New Testament – like Oman's questioner at Auburn Seminary – will be dissatisfied with a personal theism that marginalises the doctrinal tradition. But for those who value an *I-Thou* model of faith, Oman will have a much stronger appeal. Oman presents a Christology which – like all existentialist, or personally grounded, Christology – speaks to the heart and sets experience above historical detail. Oman leaves the reader with a faith in Christ our contemporary, a faith which travels lightly with respect to tradition.

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[79] *Honest Religion*, 102. Obviously, there are echoes of Schleiermacher in Oman's idea of unbroken God-consciousness in Christ. Grant's criticism of Oman on this point is that in his focus on *Christus Victor* he did not acknowledge sufficiently the anguish of Christ on the Cross. However, Oman is more balanced on the point than Grant allows.

4.2 Beatitudes and parables

Oman gives an interpretation of the beatitudes in part two of *Grace and Personality.* The beatitudes, he argues, should be read as manifestation of grace. It is not an interpretation that is readily apparent to the reader, to the preacher, or indeed to the New Testament scholar.[80] The connection between the beatitudes and grace is, again, predicated upon Oman's ontology. The blessings that the beatitudes bestow are contingent upon a realisation of transcendent values of the sacred and the holy, together with a deep dependence on God's constant love and succour. If this metaphysical framework is not borne in mind, Oman's commentary on the beatitudes can make rather obscure reading. In the light of the philosophical tenets of Oman's philosophy, however, they become lucid and illuminating. In essence, the beatitudes amount to joy in the Lord because he can be totally depended upon in every circumstance. Without the comfort of this insight, the Sermon on the Mount becomes more moralistic than anything that could be conjured up by the most severe of the Pharisees. As purely moral precepts, they are "a ground of despair and not of blessedness".[81] Happily their essence does not lie in "resolution and effort", but upon insight into God's all embracing love which enables in proportion as it demands; and, therefore, the beatitudes are "the good news of glorious freedom and not a moral code to enslave by impossible rules of refraining from evil".[82]

Oman's meaning becomes clearer in his commentary on the various beatitudes themselves. He divides them into three groups which correspond to self-consciousness, self-direction and self-determination. [As noted in chapter four, these are categories which define what it is to be a person in Henry Calderwood's *Hand-book of Moral Philosophy* and which Oman repeats in his definition of personality.] He admits that "this may seem a very technical scheme to apply to the Beatitudes:

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[80] On the subject of the beatitudes and their interpretation see, "Reflections on the Sermon on the Mount" by W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jnr., in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol.44 No 3 (1991). Six interpretations are given: the monastic, the absolutist, the doctrine of the two Kingdoms, the ethics of intention, the Christological and the historical critical. Oman's interpretation does not fit with any of these interpretations; it is, we argue, the outcome of his particular philosophy combining personal idealism and realism.

[81] *Grace and Personality*, 94.

[82] *Grace and Personality*, 94.

and it is not suggested that Jesus constructed them after that pattern".[83] So from the outset, Oman acknowledges a philosophical perspective; though in his spiritual realism he claims a religious intuition at one with the witness of Jesus.

Taking the first group of three, Oman sees in them a particular consciousness, what Jesus calls poverty of spirit, mourning and meekness. This consciousness is the ground of happiness, because it is receptive to love as the meaning of the world. Human emptiness is open to divine fullness and disenchantment with the world rests in the assurance of a purpose beyond it. In the service of God, what is weak, broken and fragile becomes the vehicle of divine strength. Faith in God changes everything, though empirically all may remain the same. Intuition of love as the meaning of creation lifts the soul into a new, divine, world of belonging. The goodness of God's love makes all things new.

The second group of beatitudes speaks of blessed self-direction. Oman warns of the inadequacy of rules in this sphere. True happiness is born of what the heart actively seeks. In longing for justice and for mercy and purity of heart the soul finds its true sphere of belonging in the supernatural. The search, the journey and arrival are, however, contingent on faith accessing and practising the values of the Kingdom of God. Thus, purity of heart sees God because, like God, it is kind to the evil and the unthankful. The contrast with conventional morality is stark. Oman concludes: "as the demands of outward respectability do not grow less harsh as they become more superficial, the mere moralist ends as a death's head at life's feast".[84] Life's feast is the joy of the Lord, experienced in receptivity and sharing.

The last group of beatitudes is concerned with self-determination. This is a happy though difficult path. There is no such thing as easy-going peace, there is no cheap grace. The world offers persecution to the self-determined soul that actively serves God in the spirit of Christ. Final victory can only be teleological; but, even here and

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[83] *Grace and Personality*, 96.

[84] *Grace and Personality*, 106-107.

now, peace is experienced and the earth is sanctified thereby. The "crowning victory of our self-determination" is "serenity in conflict" and "assurance of triumph".[85]

This brief synopsis gives a flavour of Oman's compact and powerful commentary on the spirituality of the beatitudes. Of particular importance are Oman's convictions: that the beatitudes are concerned with intuition and not abstract reasoning; neither are they concerned with rules, even the highest. Furthermore, relation to human beings always comes before relation to God. And morality, if it is not to slide into social convention, or become crucifying of the weak, needs the salt and light of love and compassion. Thus, Oman remarked to his students that nothing has had a more profound effect on the morality of the world than the gospel, yet in itself it is not a morality. However, without a hermeneutic shaped by the combination of personal idealism and realism, it is doubtful whether Oman, or any one, would read the beatitudes quite in this fashion. We see the backdrop of the natural and the supernatural, the empirical and the transcendent and, especially, the unity of these concepts in the personal. Experience is transfigured in light of the transcendent; and, transcendence cannot be apprehended except though the empirical. As with the prophets and with the person of Christ, the greatest of the prophets, the teaching of Christ in Oman's reading is a charter for personal freedom. Resting in divine love, the soul is free with the freedom of Christ.

One could turn, also, to the parables and observe the influence of Oman's philosophical realism, especially in the epistemological assumptions employed. For example, Oman, as we saw, posited the highest form of knowing to be that of the poet, artist and child. In all three, intuition is at its widest and deepest. It is with analysis and explanation that knowledge of reality narrows down. The parables, for Oman, exhibit this intuitive knowledge and they display poetic awareness. The parables of Jesus were "made memorable and poignant by figure and parallel, mostly from life's common things, and often by poetic form, rising to poetic beauty".[86] It is an understanding of the parables premised again on Oman's distinctive epistemology

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[85] *Grace and Personality*, 110.

[86] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 468.

and ontology. Across the whole breadth of his New Testament interpretation, the same hermeneutic applies.

Summary

This section has drawn our attention to the New Testament input into Oman's Christology. The priority of the personal is very evident when Oman discusses selected titles that the New Testament gives to Christ. The historical roots of the Christological titles do not concern him; it is the reconciling work of Jesus that is the centre of his thinking. The meanings of the terms Christ, Lord and Son are predicated upon the personal communion that Jesus enjoyed with the Father and the personal relationship he shared with humanity. Jesus was the reconciled One and becomes the reconciling One when we participate in the same relationship of freedom, love and holiness that he shared with the Father.

The teaching of Jesus serves the same end as his person. The beatitudes teach us *how* to be reconciled to God. Oman provides an original interpretation and we argue that it would have been scarcely possible without his specific philosophical background. The beatitudes describe how, in the reality of personal experience, we can experience the happiness of the transcendent in the midst of the harsh realities of the empirical world. Happiness is a question of mind over matter because mind is ultimate; however, mind needs the reality of matter in order to realise the ends of love.

One other vital piece of Oman's Christological narrative needs to be examined, that of the Cross and its importance for faith.

5 Oman's Theology of the Cross

This section focuses on Oman's theology of the Cross. It is the centre-piece of his portrait of Christ. Grant makes the comment that, "Christology for Oman proceeds from the intuition that all our existence must be judged in terms of the Cross". [87] It is a perceptive observation which challenges the idea that Oman has no Christology. Rather, the focal point of his Christology is in his theology of the Cross. This section

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[87] *Works*, 294.

will argue that Oman's theology – his philosophy of the natural and the supernatural, his emphasis on human freedom and divine love, his characterisation of Christ as the interpreter and embodiment of divine reality – all of it, in the language of piety, meets at the foot of the Cross. But, first it is helpful to clear the ground of two theologies of the Cross that Oman rejects. He was particularly critical of both kenosis and of legal theories of atonement.

5.1 Kenosis

The theory of kenosis, or the self-emptying of God in the incarnation, was a well established theology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both in Britain and in Europe.[88] The theory offered the prospect of holding on to the traditional divine attributes of Christ whilst recognising his real humanity. Ritschl, in contrast, argued that, for a realistic understanding of Christ's divinity, we must abandon speculation about divine attributes and find Christ's value for faith in his humanity. Ritschl wrote: "It is nothing else than mythology that is taught under the name of kenosis of the divine logos."[89] Oman stands in this critical tradition, finding the divinity of Christ manifest in his humanity, though not by the hypothesis of the hypostatic union.[90] Indeed, Oman goes in a more existentialist direction than Ritschl, arguing that we have faith in Christ, "not primarily as He meets us in Scripture or in doctrine, but as He meets us in life. When He is hungry, the blessed of the Father feed Him; naked, they clothe Him; sick and in prison, they visit Him".[91] And, with respect to the principle of kenosis, Oman adds:

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[88] For a discussion of the origins, development and decline of kenotic theology, see David R. Law, "Kenotic Christology", *The Blackwell Commentary to Nineteenth Century Theology*, edited David Fergusson, Chapter xii, (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 251-279.

[89] Quoted in, Alfred E. Garvie, *The Ritschlian Theology*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), 271.Garvie is a strong supporter of Ritschl in his criticism of kenosis.

[90] Laws, Op cite, comments; "There were developments in the broader theological scene which led to a decline in kenotic Christology. In Germany the theology of Albrecht Ritschl caught the imagination of a new generation of theologians.[Break]"Ritschlianism seemed to offer a way of addressing theological questions that undercut the highly complex metaphysical systems constructed by the kenoticists. It appealed to those generally critical of classical Christology with its doctrine of pre-existence and affirmation of the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures of Christ", 273. Oman belongs, not so much to the reaction against kenotic Christology, but, more to a liberal outlook that at no stage was convinced by it.

[91] *Grace and Personality*, 153.

> If the love of God is thus the inmost nature, as well as the deepest meaning of His outward working, that should be the only possible revelation; and we should never think of God as in Christ merely in condescension to the limits of our humanity. Through Christ we must think of the order of the Beatitudes, where all knowledge of Christ is related is mediated through a right relation to man.[92]

There is, therefore, no shedding of divine attributes with Christ's appearance in the world, nor a divine majesty to be taken up after the Cross. This would make Christ a temporary revelation and deprive his sufferings of their value as a window into the heart of the eternal. To think of Christ as humbling himself that he might later be exalted is, for Oman, as ridiculous as thinking that "Lincoln hewed wood as a step to the presidency".[93] The negative outcome of kenosis is that it has left the Church with two pictures of Christ: the Christ of glory and the Christ of humility. Sadly, observes Oman, "she is apt to serve one and despise the other".[94] The sufferings of Christ were not "an exceptional incident in the Divine method, but a manifestation in time of what is eternal".[95] Therefore, the only supremacy, power or might found in God is that of love. The abiding temptation has been for the Church to elevate the old order of government to the throne of the universe, forgetting "the supremacy of the everlasting order of love in freedom and freedom in love".[96] A two stage theology of Christ, from glory to humility and back again, has left the lust for power intact in humanity and the Church with ready justification for the sanctification of the worldly lordship. Kenosis wants to have a real humanity, but still to hold on to a monarchical God, waiting to assume control when the work of humble Christ is complete. In Oman's work, the ground of his criticism of kenosis is practical; latent power will not remain for long latent. In any event, in the divine economy there is no power apart from the power of love.

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[92] *Grace and Personality*, 158.

[93] *Vision and Authority*, 340.

[94] *Vision and Authority*, 341.

[95] *Vision and Authority*, 343.

[96] *Vision and Authority*, 340.

5.2 Legal interpretation of atonement

Oman has equally trenchant criticism of legal interpretations of atonement as he has for kenotic theories of Christ's person. His key objection is that legal categories can never penetrate to the root of personal relations; of nothing is this more true than the family. The law may act as a guardian of individual rights, but the dynamic of family life depends on the core values of love, sympathy, sacrifice and encouragement. What is true of family relations is true of divine-human relations. To characterise them as being in essence legal is to distort them. It was not accidental that Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God using family terms. The following long quotation is important for understanding Oman's argument.

> Love cannot be interpreted from the outside. All that can be done from without is to attempt to translate it into self-love, which is necessarily to obscure and pervert it. Not till we find ourselves in a larger, fairer world, where the supreme certainty is of a different nature, where a golden chain links God to man, and love, not self love, is the first certainty, can we perceive the meaning and glory of God's Atonement for sinful man. In this strange new world, where to gain our world is to lose it, we are but little at home. There the best are newcomers and learners.[97]

It is a radical re-orientation of the doctrine of atonement that Oman provides. It has the great advantage that it cannot be interpreted in a self-centred, individualistic manner. "The Cross speaks to us within the family of God" and to seek selfish advantage from the message of the Cross is to misunderstand the reality that it reveals. The Cross manifests the true nature of the spiritual environment in which we live and it calls us to live in this environment as we bear each other's burdens in the spirit of love. This is a new world alien to our self centred natures; so alien that atonement itself has often been falsified into a self-serving contrivance. Oman reads legal theories as examples of such contrivance:

> If the theory of substitution, legally interpreted, has, as it doubtless has, brought peace to burdened souls; if it has not hardened them in self love, but has delivered from self as well as sin, the reason is not that the theory is capable of some subtler legal interpretation which makes it truly meet some more comprehensive legal application which removes

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[97] *Vision and Authority*, 241.

> the difficulty of government in God. The true reason is that the Cross of Christ has, in spite of the theory, interpreted and displayed to burdened souls the new world in which hard legal conditions do not obtain, but where these legal frontiers of our personality have been lost in our deeper moral fellowship with our Father and our brethren.[98]

This quotation fleshes out Oman's concept of atonement. It is not substitution *per se* to which he objects, but substitution *legally interpreted*. In all loving relationships there is substitution; that is why forgiveness, healing and renewal are sacrificial for the one who dares to love. Such atoning love is evidenced in "a mother's tears and prayers".[99] Legal categories can add nothing to the reality of loving relationships; love has nothing to do with individual merit or condemnation; love introduces us to a new world, the world of God's family, where the real sin is to seek to isolate ourselves from others. Salvation is a family affair, as wide as humanity, and it has no reality apart from loving our human sister and brother. Christ manifested this new world in his undying love, suffering yet victorious. Again, the world "manifest" is important to Oman's understanding. The Cross is not an isolated event, as our participation is not an isolated event; the Cross is a revelation of the divine world of loving relationships. He speaks of "atonement" rather than "the atonement". Oman boldly concludes: "In that world alone is atonement ever preached by any writer in the New Testament."[100]

Oman's criticism of a legal understanding is illuminating and important. It speaks to believers who feel uncomfortable with the characterisation of divine human relations in legal terms. It points to the danger of self-righteousness that has often accompanied a legally appropriated relationship to Christ. Evangelical faith becomes unwittingly built on the individual ego and legal terminology reinforces the self and its privileges before God. In contrast, Oman's emphasis, that there can be no relation to God apart from our relation to humanity, directs us to the vital relatedness and corporate nature of the gospel. Ego religion gives way to soulful awareness and the legally saved self is no longer the centre of salvation. Oman argues his case on the

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[98] *Grace and Personality*, 217.

[99] *Vision and Authority*, 242.

[100] *Grace and Personality*, 214.

three-fold grounds of the image of God in every person, the testimony to God‘s grace in the whole range of human experience and the corroborative witness of the New Testament. It is interesting that, here too, Oman appeals to the New Testament witness as *corroborative*. God is always and everywhere appealing to his image in us, so that we might recognise our common humanity and responsibility towards each other. However, this witness is better attested in the Cross, where “we see the gracious relation of our Father towards us,[and] as nowhere else, is the utter service of our brethren, unconditioned by our merit, shown to be the essential spirit of His family”.[101] Oman’s understanding of atonement goes a long way towards saving his theology from the charge of individualism, or elitism. There is no salvation apart from the salvation of my sister and brother; we are saved for the good of the human family and not for the private good of our own soul.

5.3 An atoning order and icon

In the foregoing criticisms of both kenosis and legal interpretation of atonement, we have hints as to the orientation of Oman’s own thought. The death of Christ on the Cross has always been for Christian faith an historical act, and more than an historical act. Though no particular doctrine of the atonement has ever been given the imprimatur of orthodoxy, and the Church has valued the insights of tradition, the atonement has been regarded in all instances as an act of God. In one sense, Oman would assent wholeheartedly. But it is not the act *per se* that is important for Oman, but its sacramental or symbolic significance. In a sermon entitled, “the Light of the World”, Oman comments:

> If Christ is come a light to the world, it can only be because He manifests the eternal principles of God’s rule in it. Seeing they are eternal principles they cannot be adequately wrought out in time; and if they are such that, in defeat and agony and death, they can make us more than conquerors, quite obviously defeat and death cannot be the end. Yet eternal principles are not merely for eternity, but there can be no time or place where they are not valid. If we think there is a time or place in which we may not safely stake our souls on them and entrust to

[101] *Grace and Personality*, 215.

> their working all our interests private or public, the idea that we believe in Christ is mere illusion, and, if He is light, we are in darkness.[102]

Various facets of Oman's theology of the Cross coalesce in this single quotation. The Cross manifests the eternal principles that govern the world. Being ideals they cannot be fully expressed in empirical reality; and we note the recurrence of Oman's reserve with respect to finality. However, in the Cross, there is a manifestation of eternal principles that is adequate for faith in each and every circumstance. In fact, to ignore, or be indifferent to the manifestation of the eternal in the Cross is to court moral and spiritual disaster. Atonement for Oman, therefore, is at the heart of the Kingdom, or rule of God. The disclosure of God's rule of love in the Cross inspires faith "in the manifestation of what we may call an atoning order, understood by the sufferings of Christ and our partaking in them".[103]The verbal adjective "atoning" is a vital qualification to the idea of God's rule. Because God's rule is atoning, it cannot be:

> the order of the world without limit or suspension, like the law of gravitation, because it is the nature of love to endure restriction and even rejection, seeing it has respect for persons with their responsibilities in the world they create for them selves and cannot be content with any lower success than the acceptance of its order as blessedness and freedom.[104]

The Cross points to a rule of love strong as it is gentle, patient as it is mighty, victorious as it forbears, suffering as it is the expression of eternal peace. This theology of the Cross is only speculation apart from participation in the reality to which it points. We are called to "live in it, and not merely for it, so that we can afford to be gentle towards all men and do our tasks positively and in the spirit of peace, and cease to strive and cry."[105] One may even change the language and speak of an atoning environment. The spiritual environment in which human beings consciously live, an environment of freedom and love, is characterised by the light that shines *in* the darkness of the Cross. Our spiritual environment recapitulates the experience of Christ, sin still wrecks havoc and love suffers to uphold the freedom,

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[102] *Paradox of the World*, 84-85.

[103] *Grace and Personality*, 216.

[104] *Grace and Personality*, 297.

[105] *Grace and Personality*, 297.

dignity and responsibility of humanity. Oman's theology of atonement is, thus, noticeable for its distinctive features and the Cross is important for its iconic value. Atonement is a verb rather than a noun; it describes the spiritual dynamic in which we live, where love is actively bearing human failure and sin. The Cross is iconic in that it symbolises the reality of divine-human relations – human freedom, divine love, the rule of God, the sovereignty of grace – all are brought to focus in the image of Christ crucified.

Lastly, it is notable that Oman's in theology of atonement justification from sanctification are never apart but related in the experience of reconciliation. In other words, there is never an appropriation of forgiveness apart from a change of heart and the beginning of moral awakening. Writing on the subject of justification, Oman comments: "moral sincerity alone it asks and makes no inquiry regarding moral attainment." Oman never ceased to be a theologian of repentance. Though forgiveness is extended to the worst of sinners and God's love is ever available, moral awakening to the sense of the good betrayed, abused, or neglected is a precondition of appropriating forgiveness. Oman appeals to the experience of the prodigal son who "came to himself".[106] In that existential act the son found at once his father's forgiveness and reconciliation to the ways of the home he had left. Oman writes of this two-fold experience of forgiveness and reconciliation:

> ….returning means going back to God all the way, to God as he is, and not, as, before we come to ourselves we would wish him to be, and finding ourselves at home in household as He appoints it, an not as we would appoint when we prefer to it the far country.[107]

It is a stout defence of moral reality in conjunction with forgiveness and a determined avoidance of cheap grace. For Oman, even vicarious suffering which lies at the root and the marrow of divine love cannot remove the necessity for "going back to God all the way". Forgiveness is powerless, no matter what the high cost paid in the heart of the lover, until the first steps towards reconciliation are taken by the one who is in alienation from the good, the true and the beautiful. God's grace,

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[106] Luke 15:17.

[107] *Grace and Personality, 127.*

therefore, brings with it not only the opportunity for participation in God's redemptive love but, also, the possibility of loss. As noted in chapter one,[108] though ever hopeful, Oman was not a dogmatic Universalist. He wrote: "Just because every human personality is so definitely individual we cannot be sure that, in the end, there may not be a lost individual".[109] Our hope is in the character of God and that the mystery of evil ultimately comes under God's sovereignty. He continues: "The Christian hope is not in man but in the character of God and we cannot suppose him under any necessity to continue evil for its own sake".[110] Thus, the cosmic victory of the love manifest on the Cross is assured.

Finally, in one of his sermons Oman provides an interesting reflexion on the crucifix. He describes seeing a large crucifix in the cathedral in Louvain. "It is a very rude piece of carving and yet the artist had made it say what he apparently wished it to say."[111] The image was one of "a soul over whom all the billows of calamity had rolled and left him broken and stranded on the shores of time".[112] But, adds Oman, the piety which had brought many thank-offerings to the shrine for cures showed a more profound understanding of "the Master's suffering than the artist".[113] "In spite of their superstition", he writes:

> They knew at all events that his suffering over comes suffering. They saw his rent flesh, but they saw his Divine majesty gleaming through it. Christ's sorrow for them did not ultimately mean suffering and defeat, but joy and victory.[114]

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[108] Chapter One 3:3, Page 37.

[109] John Oman, "Individual" in *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, edited by James Hastings Volume 1, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1906), 815.

[110] *Dictionary of Christ*, 815. There is no indication in the rest of Oman's writing that he revised these comments. Bevan's comments that, though Oman allows for the possibility of a "lost individual", the overall impression one gets from his theology is that Oman's vision is one of universal salvation. *Doctrine of God*, 86. This is true, but universal salvation must lie in the region of hope rather than certainty. In the same article Oman remarks, that there is the possibility of final annihilation of evil, God is under no necessity to allow evil to continue if its purpose in the world is complete, 815. As Heron remarked, Oman cannot be accused of "facile optimism", *A Century of Protestant Theology*, 121.

[111] Sermon "Incarnate Majesty", *A Dialogue with* God, 49.

[112] "Dialogue with God", 49.

[113] "Dialogue with God", 49.

[114] "Dialogue with God", 49.

This appreciation of the crucifix is interesting. It is an indication of Oman's appreciation of catholic piety; and more significantly, it is interesting that he saw the crucifix as an image of his own deepest, religious convictions and a visual simplification of reconciliation and participation in the love of Christ. Oman's theology of the Cross is perhaps redolent of an older medieval piety than the forensic theology of the Reformation.

Summary

Oman's theology of the Cross, we have argued, together with his other interpreters, is at the centre of his theological thinking. Oman's critical stance towards kenosis and legal interpretations is sustained by an appeal to personal relations as being at the heart of reality. Oman speaks of atonement rather than "the atonement"; love ever suffers in the world, just as it ever gives hope of final victory. Oman's theology of atonement is participatory and forgiveness co-dependent on reconciliation. This does not detract from the centrality of the Cross to Oman's theological vision; but, the Cross does not have the forensic significance it has in Reformation theology. This leaves the question whether Oman has given sufficient priority to grace over repentance. Participation and reconciliation remain fundamental to Oman's theology of disclosure and clarification of the personal reality of God in Christ. The background hermeneutic of the inter-relation of the natural and supernatural finds iconic focus in the Cross, and – in the unlikely source of catholic piety responding to a Christ via a crucifix – Oman sees the deepest truths of Christ's Cross expressed. He is *Christus Victor*.

Appraisal

This chapter has surveyed the broad parameters of Oman's Christology: it is narrative rather than systematic; it is incarnational in an economic rather than in an ontological sense; it is rooted in the concept of prophetic religion; it draws upon the New Testament and the central focus is upon the Cross. The following points illustrate some strengths and weaknesses.

Oman's Christology is philosophically mediated, but this is not made sufficiently clear. The trajectory of Oman's thought is from a metaphysic combining empiricism

and idealism to a theology of personal reality. It would be hard to imagine Oman's portrait of Christ apart from this philosophical framework. Christ embodies this ontology, he lives *in* the atmosphere of the natural and *from* the environment of the supernatural; thus, the personal nature of reality is disclosed in the triumph of Christ. He is victorious over the impersonal and de-personalising realities of life in the world. Yet, Oman's readers, especially the "working men" who were receptive to his work,[115] probably had no awareness of philosophy. Even the preacher, who reads his books for edification, is unlikely to make a connection between Oman's Christology and his philosophy. If the philosophical under-pinning of Oman's Christology were clearer, it would remove some of the obscurity that clouds aspects of his writing.

Secondly, the corollary of Oman's philosophical hermeneutic is the supportive, rather than determinative, role played by the Bible. Most interesting and valuable to his theology is Oman's delineation of the prophetic principle. And yet, there are streams and eddies of the Bible that are valuable in themselves; and Oman may be accused of channelling them with too much intent into a prophetic paradigm and personalist metaphysic. This criticism, however, is not fatal to Oman's theological endeavour because, for him, it is not the historical context or the etymological roots of words that determine the spiritual relevance of scripture. It is the transcendent reality in which the text coheres that matters. Oman's spiritual realism always triumphs over historical particularity; the value of any text lies in its witness to freedom in the love of God, no matter how primitive or elemental that witness may be.

Thirdly, one is brought back, therefore, to the fact that freedom is both the creative principle and the control factor around which Oman's builds his Christology. Freedom, as explored in the last chapter, is fundamental to Oman's theism. The freedom of human beings is the correlate of the personal nature of God. Christ comes at an apex of a long line of development. In Christ, the self-transcendence of the

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[115] Oman expressed appreciation of the fact that readers with "no technical knowledge…..some of them working men….understood what he was driving at". *Grace and Personality*, 3rd edition, Preface x. The present writer falls into this category, being attracted to Oman's books long before becoming a student of theology.

universe and the self-conscious transcendence of humanity come to a flowering.[116] Christ exemplifies the freedom at the heart of a universe, evolving into the loving purposes of God. It is Christ's combination of radical freedom and utter devotion that make him a revelation of the divine in humanity. Grant, more than any other scholar, appreciates the heart of Oman's work when he says: "The Father's love and man's freedom to partake of it are of the essence of Christianity. All else is but relative and changing".[117]This is the sum and substance of Oman's Christology. In Christ, freedom and love were linked as never before, or since, and the possibility of such freedom and participation in God's love is made immediate to all who hear the gospel. That immediacy does not compromise God's freedom to make his love known anywhere at any time, but in Christ it finds an unsurpassed clarity.

Fourthly, Oman's narrative form is an appropriate vehicle of delivery for a Christology that is more about vision than historical authority. Oman desires a vision of things whole, but not totality. The latter is not a human possibility and claims to completeness invariably distort vision of reality. For Oman, the light shines through the cracks in the roof of the house of knowledge, as much as through the carefully constructed windows. It is a perspective in keeping with his epistemology; where he commends artistic sensibility as being most open to the higher reaches of knowledge. It is not unexpected, therefore, that in his own work he should have a narrative, rather than a systematic approach. Oman's narrative Christ reveals and then steps back; he stimulates vision and does not direct. Christ is a great exemplar of the narrative method, especially as a story teller who committed nothing to writing. As Oman recounts, Jesus relied on God's ability to witness to himself and he sought to

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[116] We have noted historical antecedents in Campbell Fraser and Pringle Pattison. The confluence of Creation and Christology is, of course, an ongoing theme in theologies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Without suggesting that they imagined the relationship between the cosmological and the Christological in the *exact* manner of Oman, the idea of confluence is found in otherwise diverse thinkers such as Teilhard, Rahner and Staniloae. For introductions see, Jean-Pierre Demoulin, *Let Me Explain*, selected texts, (London: Collins), 1970; F. J. Michael McDermott, "Karl Rahner" in *The Blackwell Companion to the Theologians*, edited Ian S. Markham, Volume Two (Chichester: 2009), 434-451. Dumitru Staniloae represents an interesting example from the Orthodox position; he highlights the idea of the world as theophany, transparent to the transcendent light of God; and, he posits the integration of "natural revelation" and "supernatural revelation". Charles Miller, *The Gift of the world: An Introduction to the Theology of Dumitru Staniloe* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), 2000.

[117] *Works*, 168.

be no authority apart from God's continual witness in and through the panoply of existence. Narrative is as old as humanity: seers, sages, poets, prophets have from time immemorial given human voice to the voice of God. And, Oman continues:

> This was crowned by Jesus, who used the simplest and most popular speech; and had leisure of mind to turn his teaching into parable and memorable saying; drew his illustrations from field and sky, farmer and merchant, creditor and debtor, the house mother and the children's play; was pitiful even amid the sternest rebuke.[118]

The narrative method has an illustrious history. And today, Christian faith is born out of the narrative of Jesus and is authenticated in the narrative of experience. For Oman, to become fixated with historical critical questions – which freedom, of course, sets us at liberty to pursue – is to miss the point of Jesus' story. We must not become arrested by the text; it is a point of departure to the realms of spirit where text has no power to determine the limits of thought, conscience or action and where faith is of God alone. In Oman's theology there is no neurotic anxiety that asks for infallible, written proof of divine reality. Rather, the narrative of Christ testifies to a divine presence that is self-authenticating: speaking to the heart, stimulating the mind, engaging the will. The story of Christ in its radical freedom transcends attempts to capture it in historical absolutes. The gospel story illuminates experience and introduces the liberty wherewith Christ has set us free.[119]

Fifthly, Oman's doctrine of the atonement is a bold attempt to relate holiness and love in a unified rather than a dialectical way. In any theological schema morality and grace, holiness and love are never easy to reconcile.[120] Oman's theology of forgiveness *in and through* reconciliation is one way in which moral requirements and unconditional forgiveness can be brought together. In preaching and in pastoral application, however, care needs to be taken lest the integral nature of holiness and love should mask the free grace essential to the gospel. The burdened soul, already morally oppressed, weighed down with guilt and shame, will need the unconditional

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[118] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 469.

[119] Galatians 5: 1.

[120] Dialectical theology affirms the triumph of grace over law in the act of atonement. Oman stands in the tradition of Ritschl where moral imperatives and grace *together* express the love of God – holy as it is gracious.

word of forgiveness. That is imperative. On the other hand, the aggressive and controlling abuser can hardly receive forgiveness in anything other than a vacuous sense if the pain of the victim has not awakened a moral loathing of the crimes he committed. The gospel cannot, therefore, be communicated apart from context, or without sensitivity to circumstances and, most of all, without wrestling with the mystery of holy love. Moral reality and free grace cannot be separated without doing harm to both; Oman's theology of reconciliation, participation and homecoming represents *one way* of bringing them into creative and relationship.

Sixth and lastly, Oman's sharpest critics will be those who start with the premise that an authoritative historical revelation is necessary to the coherence and endurance of Christianity. Such a critic may even argue that the dependency on the Bible in Oman's work is inconsistent with his experiential methodology. In other words, Oman's theology bears the hallmarks of foundational revelation to a degree greater than acknowledged; otherwise, his theology would not have the Christian focus that it does. If theological thinking were left to the whims of experience then a hopeless pluralism would be the result. The hub of historicist criticism is that there is no necessary line of development from religious experience to the Christian tradition. Oman accepts that no one starts with a tabula rasa; theological thinking is tradition conditioned, in his own case by Christianity. The wisdom of tradition is a promontory that provides large vistas that would be impossible without it. Others, of course, begin with different cultural perspectives and it is inevitable that we inhabit a world of competing, conflicting, ontological claims. That granted, God is his own witness in whatever language and cultural medium the divine is recognised and Christian commitment can acknowledge its historical roots without deifying them. Personal freedom stands between gratitude for the past and openness to the future and personal faith need not be afraid of religious plurality. God has many children of different skin colour, of language, of gender, sexual orientation and of belief: any one feature is as important to God as the other. Love is the only necessary canon in religion as in life. Even this insight is not exclusive to Christianity, though it received particular expression in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The gap between historicist foundations and Oman's experiential method is thus un-bridged and itself an occasion for charity in difference. If Christ so calls us to freedom, what then of

the Church? Is it the servant of our freedom or a limit to our liberty? These are the questions addressed in the next Chapter.

Chapter Six

Ecclesiology: looking for the city that is to come

> In some order of love and freedom, that is in some kind of Church, the historic struggle of mankind must be gathered up, and if it is not being served by the present churches, then the supreme effort should be to recall them to their task. [1]
>
> We have a building not made with hands, eternal in the heavens[2]

Introduction

The Church was of no minor interest to Oman. This fact has been recognised by Healey and Grant both of whom discuss Oman's ecclesiology, though coming to opposite conclusions. Healey defends Oman against the charge of neglecting institutional expressions of faith and Grant repeats the charge, arguing that Oman undervalues the concrete and particular.[3] This is a question to be kept on hold. In either conclusion, the Church remains an important feature of Oman's work from beginning to end. Oman's first book –apart from his Kerr lectures and his translation of Schleiermacher – was *The Church and the Divine Order*; published in 1910; and in his posthumous, *Honest Religion,* published in 1941, he returned to the theme of "the Church and the Churches".[4] The Church may be termed the meeting point for Oman's seminal ideas. The Church inhabits the creative boundary between the natural and the supernatural; it stands in a prophetic trajectory that reaches its climax in Christ. Alternatively, the Church is the outcome of the long continuum of evolution; it is the fruit of human adaption to the spiritual environment in which all of creation subsists. The Church, in the language of the New Testament, is an apocalyptic community; it is prophetic of the new heavens and new earth to be revealed. All of these ideas combine to provide the architecture of Oman's

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[1] *The Church and the Divine Order*, Preface, vii.

[2] 2nd Corinthians 5:1b

[3] For Healey, See *Religion and Reality*, Chapter Three and for Grant, *Collected Works*, 326-347.

[4] *Honest Religion*, Chapter XVIII.

ecclesiology. This chapter explores these trajectories and follows them through to their practical conclusions in Oman's often misunderstood ecclesiology.

Themes in outline

The first section will focus on the relationship of the Church to Christ. That the Church was founded by Christ is fundamental to Oman; but he does not draw normal historical conclusions from the fact. The authority of tradition – either in the Protestant form of the scriptures and doctrine or in the Catholic form of infallible teaching – should not, he believes, be substituted for the self-authenticating witness of God in the present. It is Oman's conviction that Christ's vision of the Kingdom of God and his founding of a community that lives in obedience to that vision is not predicated on a continuing magisterial authority in institutional or historical format. On the contrary, the only authority that Jesus exercised and the only authority he warranted for the Church is that of spiritual insight speaking to spiritual insight. This spiritual foundation determines all that Oman understands by the Church.

The second section takes up the theme of the apocalyptic. It is a theme that sets Oman add odds with much of contemporary scholarship but in considerable harmony with some in the nineteenth. These historical comparisons and contrasts are examined. It becomes clear that Oman understood the apocalyptic primarily as a philosophy of history rather than as prophetic of eschatological events; this is important for his view of the Church as a sign of *unfolding* cosmic reality. The Church in the language of the New Testament is an apocalyptic community between earth and heaven, but always – when true to its divine vocation – leaning towards heaven.

The third section looks at the evolutionary presuppositions of Oman's ecclesiology. An evolutionary world view allows Oman to situate the Church in a dynamic continuum. The self-conscious spiritual evolution of humanity that is historically evidenced in the history of religion, which comes to flowering in the prophetic traditions of Israel, and in Christ par excellence, continues in the Church. This evolutionary view of the Church is fundamental to Oman's conviction as to the provisional nature of doctrine and tradition. And, again, the primary reality is the Cross, because there a new evolutionary development took place.

The fifth section examines Oman's ecclesiology in the context of nineteenth century ecclesiology. Oman acknowledges the influence of German scholars Loofs and Sohm. However, as in all of his work, Oman's individuality shines through; and though scholarly context illuminates the influences on his thinking, the *sui generis* nature of his work remains its most distinguishing feature. These explorations further show the contrast between Oman and Barth.

The fourth and last section examines the practical implications of Oman's ecclesiology with regard to institutions, ministry and people and sacraments.

1 The Church of Christ

Oman mentions Jesus' founding of the church in two places in particular. In *The Church and the Divine Order* he devotes the second chapter to the subject of "Jesus as Founder";[5] it follows on from the initial theme of prophetic preparation. In *Vision and Authority*, second revised edition, Oman returns to Jesus' relation to the Church under the heading, "The Founding of the Church".[6] In these books, separated by nearly two decades,[7] Oman does not vary from his central arguments. In summary, Oman contends that Jesus gave to the Church its foundational vision, the dream by which it lives and the method by which it carries out its mission.

The vision Jesus gave to the Church was apocalyptic and it will be discussed in more detail in the next section. The essence of it, however, was Jesus' conviction of a spiritual reality, ever ready to break into the human realm wherever human lives are open and receptive. "The fundamental conviction was that the true divine order is ever ready to break into the world, if men will only let it break into their hearts".[8] The vision was realised in Jesus' own person and for that reason there is a note of joy

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[5] *Divine Order*, 21-52.

[6] *Vision and Authority*, 125-130.

[7] The first edition of *Vision and Authority* was published in 1901. However, it had not the success of the "new and revised edition" of 1928. The *Church and the Divine Order* appeared in 1911.

[8] *Divine Order*, 44.

in the New Testament.[9] Significantly, the vision Christ gave to the Church is never to be identified with worldly realities, no matter how exalted or worthy. Oman comments:

> Jesus did not, with the Catholic theologians identify the Kingdom of God with the Church, nor with modern theologians since Schleiermacher, with the progressive amelioration of humanity.[10]

The Church, therefore, must always point away from itself. Even the personal sense of divine love which is real to the disciple must not be taken as an end in itself; it is prophetic of a blessing that will embrace all.[11] Jesus' relation to the Church, therefore, is that of inspiration, directing his disciples throughout all history to the transcendent reality of God's love upon which all other blessings are contingent.

The Church's dream is to see vision become reality. The Church is a community that dares to live by the values of the Kingdom of God, the values of freedom and love, the values Jesus disclosed and which are the antithesis of the power structures that prevail in the world.

> Instead of an ecclesiastical programme and incipient hierarchy, we have, therefore, a society organised on the sole basis of love and equality and mutual service.[12]

Sadly, Oman argues, this dream which was the true foundation of the Church has suffered shipwreck over the millennia. The Church has sought security in institutional authority instead of spiritual freedom. "The Church, it is said, also needed the conservative method of all society, meaning by that an authority in which first is first and last last."[13] With this way of compromise for the sake of self-preservation, Oman will have nothing to do. It is the point at which the radical import

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[9] It was something present in Himself that the sons of the bride chamber could not but rejoice ……and the whole of the New Testament is a witness to the amazing strength and joyfulness which sprang from contact with His spirit. *Divine Order*, 42.

[10] *Doctrine of God*, 42.

[11] "The gospel is more than the restoration of the individual soul to the love of the heavenly Father, being further the assurance that this love will one day have its perfect manifestation. *Divine Order*", 42.

[12] *Divine Order*, 50.

[13] *Divine Order*, 50.

of his ecclesiology is felt. To follow Oman's interpretation of Jesus' vision, and of the Church's dream, is to depart from the ecclesiastical emphasis of two thousand years. The Church in its varied communions has looked backwards for historical legitimisation rather than forward in faith and hope. It has sought security in the very things that Oman regards as provisional and relative: Bible, creed and institution.

Turning to the method that Jesus has bequeathed to the Church, Oman takes up a similarly radical stance. One is amazed, Oman argues, that Jesus, whose teaching was of such import, refrained from giving it written expression. This omission could not have been accidental on Jesus' part. "It shows", argues Oman, "the kind of authority He desired for it, and what kind He did not desire".[14] Oman continues:

> Instead of giving it a final form, which would secure a full and precise account capable of accurate transmission, He addressed Himself to the few who partially understood Him, leaving, doubtless, many a precious word to be forgotten, and perhaps many a gracious action misinterpreted.[15]

The salutary lesson, to Oman's mind, is that Jesus never intended anything he said to become "an imperative authority" which in the nature of the case would be "an enslaving authority over mind".[16] Jesus' only method was "to trust the insight and faithfulness of souls that love Him".[17] It was to this Church, the community of faithful souls that love him, that Jesus "gave the task of transmitting His teaching and depicting His life".[18] This could be done only when the story of Jesus life and teaching was written in the manuscript of loving hearts and faithful lives. The written manuscript could then take its place in the larger living witness of lives made free and hearts transformed in Christ. The Church, Oman believes, has communicated the gospel best when it has appealed "to the spiritual nature of man and called him to his heritage of freedom".[19]

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[14] *Vision and Authority*, 126.

[15] *Vision and Authority*, 126.

[16] *Vision and Authority*, 126.

[17] *Vision and Authority*, 125.

[18] *Vision and Authority*, 125.

[19] *Vision and Authority*, 127.

Oman was aware that his argument for freedom in relation to written authority falls on deaf ears and the Holy Spirit is often called upon to bolster any perceived deficiency in the written records. For example, in order to preserve the absolute authority of the written word, appeal is made to the "special endowment of the Holy Spirit".[20] Oman acknowledges that Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would bring to the disciples' remembrance all the things he taught them. But, Oman argues, this is no argument for infallibility; it is an argument for "living transmission"[21] – and by "living transmission" Oman means Christian *praxis*. The Spirit brings to remembrance the things not in the first instance "to be recorded, but to be lived".[22] It is continuity of Christian life and witness that has preserved the gospel and the community that lives by it. All else is subsidiary to self-authenticating authority of the Christian life which is, in effect, vision turned into reality; dream and method are empty concepts apart from the Christian living.[23]

Oman, therefore, places Jesus unmistakably at the centre of the Church in a unique way. The Church, when it follows the vision of her Lord, acknowledges his authority in a way that surpasses anything that could be affirmed by the written word. Christ reigns by the only authority he would ever wish to have: the authority of mind speaking to mind, of heart to heart and soul to soul. It is, argues Oman, the only authority that the Church should ever seek to have; it is the only authority that unites faith and freedom; it is the only authority that marks the difference between the Church and the world. There is a sense in which liberal Christianity has always recognised the spiritual nature of Christ's authority and the inviolable place of conscience and freedom. However, the final break with the authority of tradition has never been made in Churches that claim orthodoxy. As a result, the conflict between freedom and faith, between the demands of conscience and the demands of tradition, is apt to recur. Oman's radical option of placing the authority of Christ on the side of

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[20] *Vision and Authority*, 127.

[21] *Vision and Authority*, 127-128.

[22] *Vision and Authority*, 130.

[23] Compare this idea with St Paul as he writes to the Church in Corinth: "You yourself are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on human hearts". 2nd Corinthians 3:2

personal freedom would appear to be the only true reconciliation of faith and freedom and the only exclusive spiritual foundation for the Church of Christ.

Summary

Oman places a high premium on the fact that the Church is the Church of Christ. Jesus Christ has shared with the Church his vision of the Kingdom of God and the Church lives by the dream of that vision becoming reality. However, Christ's method is the key to both the vision and the dream. The Church is called to be a society totally different from the principalities and powers of the world. It is to be a fellowship of freedom and love where the Lordship of Christ resides in the self authenticating appeal of his life and teaching. This is the only authority Jesus ever sought and the only authority the Church should ever seek.

2 The Apocalyptic

If the vision Christ gave to the Church is its exclusive foundation then the content of that vision becomes a matter of import. This introduces a second feature of the architecture of Oman's ecclesiology, namely, apocalyptic literature. It was in the language of the apocalyptic that Jesus' vision was mediated and the birth of the Church cannot be understood apart from Jesus' use of apocalyptic ideas and his transformation of them. This introduces a wide theme which is navigated as summarily as possible.

The apocalyptic is a many-sided concept. Within Old Testament literature the apocalyptic texts are somewhat exotic and stand in contrast to the historical, legal and poetic narratives. Some scholars view apocalyptic texts as foreign intrusions into the Jewish tradition, with roots traceable to Persia and Zoroastrianism; this imputation of foreign origins tends towards negative appraisal. On the other hand, others have argued that the apocalyptic horizon may be traced to the wisdom tradition within Israel, or it may be a modification of prophesy.[24] In New Testament scholarship, apocalyptic literature has also provoked continuing debate.

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[24] See, John J. Collins, "Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Ancient World" in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, edited Jerry J. Walls (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).40-55.

Contemporary New Testament scholar, Benedict T. Viviano, suggests that studies of the apocalyptic have fallen into two categories: the historical and the theological.[25] The historical studies of the late nineteenth century were concerned with the ethical, liberal Jesus whose teaching represented a spiritual kernel which could be detached from an apocalyptic husk.[26] A *volte-face* came with the work of New Testament scholars, Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer,[27] who argued that Jesus is inseparable from the apocalyptic milieu in which he lived and, consequently, the gospel is deeply rooted in apocalyptic expectations. These expectations were time-conditioned and unfulfilled. The historical origins of the Jesus traditions have remained the focus of attention for many inside and outside the Christian faith; and the quest for the historical Jesus has been ever renewed.

Whilst historical enquiry has often proved threatening to the integrity of traditional belief, theological thinking has proved more encouraging. Eschatology has been a creative starting point for Christology in theologians as diverse as Barth and Tillich in the mid-twentieth century and Moltmann and others at the beginning of the twenty-first.[28] Viviano writes: "the heroes of historical truth are Weiss and Schweitzer, and the heroes of theological truth are Moltmann and Metz".[29]

Oman belongs to the theological end of the spectrum; however, care needs to be taken with definitions. New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan points out that if the terms apocalyptic and eschatology are equated, then "confusion reigns within

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[25] *Handbook* 73-90, Benedict T. Viviano, "Eschatology and the Quest for the Historical Jesus".

[26] Adolf von Harnack, 1851-1930, represented the high point of liberal theology. See, Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* third edition, revised and edited, (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904).

[27] Johannes Weiss, 1863-1914, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (1892) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971); Albert Schweitzer, 1875-1965, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1910) (New York: Macmillan,1968).

[28] Barth wrote; A Christianity that is not wholly and utterly and irreducibly eschatological has absolutely nothing to do with Christ….." Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, second edition, (1922), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933); see also, Paul Tillich, "Eschatology and History" (1927) in *The Interpretation of History*, translated Elsa E. Talmey (New York: Scribner's, 1936), 278-82; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming God: Christian Eschatology*, translated Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, translated Geoffrey W Bromiley, Volume 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

[29] *Handbook*, 86. For Metz, see Johannes Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World*, translated David Smith (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) and *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a Bourgeois World*, translated, Peter Mann (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

scholarly discourse".[30] In his opinion, the apocalyptic is best considered as one of the subdivisions of eschatology. Certainly, it has been eschatology in the wider sense that has been prominent in theology. Eschatological events, namely the death of Christ, the resurrection, ascension and parousia, have proved central to Christological thinking, offering a biblical metaphysic of openness and hope. The Kingdom of God inaugurated by the crucified and risen Christ is, thus, the ground of reality *now*, as well as a herald of the world to *come*. As one theologian sums it up, "promise is the leading category in eschatology".[31]

In Oman's work the twentieth century correlation between eschatological events and Christology is absent. Oman's concern is with the apocalyptic as spiritual *vision* rather than *event*. In this way, Oman circumnavigated the rocks of historicism and the unfulfilled apocalyptic of Weiss and Schweitzer. His argument challenged the view that Jesus shared the primitive, cataclysmic assumptions current in his time. How, asked Oman, could one so spiritual be so mistaken about the nature of reality? The apocalyptic mind of Jesus was not dominated by the materialism of his contemporaries; on the contrary, Jesus looked for a new spiritual order in preference to a political Kingdom or violent supernatural intervention. In Oman's estimation, the apocalyptic sensibility of Jesus is more akin to poetry than to politics; in fact, the rejection of a political kingdom was inherent in the way of the Cross.

The Church past and present must in some sense have an apocalyptic outlook if it is to be true to the vision of one she calls Lord. For Oman, this means the paradox of continuing other worldliness as well as continual reception of the world as a gift. Religion is always "in need of some kind of apocalyptic outlook;[32] some sense that life is not good in itself but only good when we overcome it through faith in a rule which God himself will introduce".[33] The apocalyptic imperative, in other words, is fundamental to the Church if it is to follow the way of Jesus. In platitudinous

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[30]John Dominic Crossan, "Eschatology, Apocalypticism, and the Historical Jesus" in Marvin Meyer and Charles Hughes, edited, *Jesus: Then and Now* (Harrisburg, PN: Trinity Press, 2001), 91.

[31] Gerhard Sauter, in "Protestant Theology" *Handbook*, 259.

[32] *Divine Order*, 39.

[33] *Divine Order*, 39.

language, the Church must be in the world but not of it. And, in Oman's philosophical terms, the Church realises its apocalyptic identity when it lives in the spiritual atmosphere of the supernatural, known through the sacred and the holy, and inspired by the memory of the Holy One, Jesus Christ, her Lord.

2.1 Oman and the Book of Revelation

Oman's own excursion into the realm of New Testament scholarship provides useful insight into his particular understanding of apocalyptic literature. His first venture was the *Book of Revelation: Theory of the Text*[34] which was a theory of text, translation and commentary. Dissatisfaction with the result led him to a second publication: *The Text of Revelation: A Revised Theory*.[35] Interestingly, the genesis of Oman's interest in the Apocalypse came almost by accident. Having attended a seminar by F.C. Burkitt,[36] he came away with "the vague idea, that to think about religion, without knowing a little about its documents, is not much more use than to be a pundit on its documents, without doing a little thinking about religion".[37] In any event, with the help and encouragement of a number of scholars, among them F. C. Burkitt himself and T.W. Manson[38], one of Oman's pupils, he published the *Book of Revelation* in 1923 and the *Text of Revelation* in 1928. A. E. Brooke, in his reviews, was proverbially damning through faint praise. On the first work, he commented: "brilliant and suggestive as it is, it is not convincing"[39]; and with regard to both publications, he left the matter open as to the worth of Oman's endeavours: "students must judge for themselves whether these explorations are convincing".[40] Two points

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[34] John Oman, *Book of Revelation*: Theory of the Text: rearranged text and translation: Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923).

[35] John Oman, *The Text of Revelation*: A Revised Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928).

[36] Francis Crawford Burkitt (1864-1935); Norris Professor of Divinity at Cambridge from 1905 until before his death.

[37] *Book*, Preface vii.

[38] Thomas Walter Manson (1893-1958), Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism, University of Manchester from 1936 until 1958.

[39] A. E. Brooke, "The Apocalypse" a review article, *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 1924, Volume xxv, 303-307. A. E. Brooke was Dean of King's College Cambridge and Lecturer in Divinity.

[40] A. E. Brooke, Review of *The Text of Revelation* by John Oman, *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 1929, Volume xxx, 314-315.

were in contention: whether the text of the Book of Revelation was originally comprised of twenty-seven equal sections; and, more germane to our discussion, whether the inspiration that gave birth to the Apocalypse is intuitive and spiritual or crudely materialistic. Oman rejoined, with Brooke in mind:

> One critic dismissed the previous book as the work of a twentieth century philosopher, who had no understanding of the mind of a first-century Christian. In any case, the criticism can only apply to the commentary, which might be all wrong yet the re-arrangement of the text right. In the order of probability interpretation must necessarily be last: and till the other probabilities are settled, it (the commentary) had better not appear at all as in the present book.[41]

Oman added no commentary to the second book. Yet, he never departed from his conviction that the original apocalyptic hope centred on the transcendent Kingdom of love, which can at any time transform the heart and, with it, all things. In his commentary, Oman wrote of the Apocalypse:

> Our author seems to have written in a period of transition between two ways of thinking of the second advent. From Judaism Christianity inherited the idea of the Kingdom of God as a catastrophic change. But, possibly from the beginning, interest was transferred from outward circumstances to a new relation to God, whereby any sudden change in the order of the world depended on a change of heart.[42]

Thus, in his studies in the Book of Revelation, Oman re-iterates the theme central to his Christology; that Jesus stood on the shoulders of the prophets and went beyond them in his visionary insight.[43]Jewish prophecy ran aground in national and materialist expectations; but, in Jesus the intuitive spirit rose to new heights. Jesus saw the Kingdom of God as a *spiritual rule* of love; this was "the nerve and sinew of Christ's teaching".[44] In the course of its history, the Church has repeatedly fallen short of Jesus' ideal and betrayed "God's way of the patient endurance of love, however long".[45] The way of patient love – a love that can never be fully realised

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[41] *Text*, 3.

[42] *Book*, 138.

[43] *Divine Order*, 10-17, 23, 35-40 and 133.

[44] *Divine Order*, 14.

[45] *Divine Order*, 17.

under temporal conditions – is, Oman believed, the only adequate basis of Christian belief and fellowship. The Church must live by Jesus apocalyptic insight and practise – to use special metaphors – here below the love that is from above.

> The prophetic hope is in a Day of the Lord, and not in a steady, if slow, success in reforming the world; because, being concerned with the central reverence of our hearts, it looks forward to a day of enlightenment and not a day of amendment.[46]

Oman, therefore, in contradiction of Schweitzer, saw the apocalyptic far from being a time conditioned, redundant idea; but, rather, essentially an insight into the nature of reality. Oman told his students, "The prophets, Jesus and the Apostles may not have had great historical perspective, but they were men of great religious insight".[47] Oman's work on the text of the Book of Revelation may not have received the approval of his peers, but it did not shift him from his fundamental convictions with regard to apocalyptic literature: that it is essentially visionary rather than prophetic of world events. In his commentary, Oman was not directly concerned with the Church, but the premise of his work was that the apocalyptic vision of Jesus lives on in the expectations of the Christian community and Christian experience presages a new heaven and a new earth.

2.2 A nineteenth century perspective

To position Oman's theology of the apocalyptic in context one needs to go back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Two points of comparison may be made: the first is with Old Testament scholar R. H. Charles.[48] Oman makes a passing comment in his preface to the *Book of Revelation* that, with regard to the text, "he had not entirely escaped the influence of Dr. Charles and certain German writers".[49] However, beyond the details of the text, there is broad similarity between Oman's interpretation of the apocalyptic as a religious philosophy and that of Charles. Contemporary New Testament scholar, Adela Yarbro Collins, indentifies Charles as

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[46] *Grace and Personality*, 285.

[47] WT/1/17c, Page 84.

[48] Robert Henry Charles (1855-1931) was born in Cookstown Co. Tyrone, now N. Ireland, and may be termed the father of British studies in apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature.

[49] *Book*, Preface ix

a distinctive voice at the turn of the nineteenth century. Charles, she writes, defended the value of apocalypticism against scholars like Harnack and argued "against most scholars of his time that the move from prophecy to apocalypticism was not decline, but advance…."[50] Yarbro Collins adds, Charles "rightly rejected the view, common then and now, that apocalypticism is pessimistic".[51] This positive assessment of Charles is borne out if one considers, for example, Charles' monograph, *Religious Development between the Old Testament and the New Testament*.[52] Charles argues that apocalyptic intuition was a development from the particularity to universality, from prophetic comment on circumstances to that of insight into the ultimate nature of reality. He writes:

> But whist prophecy and apocalyptic occupy to some extent the same province, the scope of the apocalyptic is incommensurably greater. [Break] While the ordinary man saw only the outside of things in their incoherence and isolation, the apocalyptist sought to get behind the surface and to the essence of events, the spiritual purposes and forces that underlie them and give them their real significance. With this end in view apocalyptic sketched in outline the history of the world and of mankind, the origin of evil its course, and inevitable overthrow, the ultimate triumph of righteousness, and the final consummation of all things.[53]

Charles concludes that the apocalyptic is best understood as the spiritual refinement of the prophetic tradition and "apocalyptic and not prophecy was the first to grasp that the great idea that all history alike, human, cosmological, and spiritual, is a unity – a unity following naturally as a corollary of the unity of God preached by the prophets".[54] The similarity to Oman is uncanny, not only in placing the apocalyptic at the heart of biblical theism, but in positing the apocalyptic as unifying vision of the empirical and the ideal. And, like Oman, Charles saw apocalyptic awareness

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[50] Adela Yarbro Collins, "Apocalypticism and New Testament Theology" in *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, edited by Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 45.

[51] *Nature of NT*, 46.

[52] R. H. Charles, *Religious Development between the Old and New Testaments* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1914).

[53] *Religious Development*, 24.

[54] *Religious Development*, 24.

reach its zenith in Christ. The apocalyptic was a preparation for the day when "with the advent of Christ we enter a new and larger atmosphere recalling and yet far transcending, what had been best in the prophetic and apocalyptic periods of the past".[55] For Charles and Oman alike, the apocalyptic is fundamentally the apex of prophecy and more, the epitome of personal religion. Charles comments that, in the progressive religious development, some may "assimilate and verify the truths of the past and thus preserve the spiritual tradition"[56]; however, "there are others who do more: they not only verify the religious truths of the past but they add to them others won in personal communion with the immediate Living God".[57]

Yarbro Collins, in her essay, concludes that, "given the desirability of constructing a public New Testament theology and the diversity of the Church, it is wise to affirm that apocalypticism may be related to theology in a variety of ways".[58] These ways stretch from Max Horkheimer's[59] non-theistic interpretation to that of Hal Lindsey's[60] fundamentalist reading of the Book of Revelation. Charles she considers to be in the middle of the spectrum; yet, his perspective is different from the "the liberal strategy of deriving abstract ideas from the narrative detail of the texts".[61] Unlike "advanced liberals", Charles did not see ethics as the kernel and apocalyptic as husk. "In the language of his time, Charles affirmed the unity of form and content in apocalyptic texts, arguing that apocalyptic texts as such are imbued with ethical import".[62] This may be said of Oman, also; he accepts the religious realism of the

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[55] *Religious Development*, 45.

[56] *Religious Development*, 12.

[57] *Religious Development*, 12; Also, though Yarbro Collins makes no reference to the influence of Idealism upon Charles' hermeneutics, it is undoubted there in his emphasis upon the unity of the historical and relative in the transcendent. However, the *personal* focus, as opposed to determinism, is vital to Charles as to Oman. Neither lost sight of the Creator-creator distinction and the qualitative distance between them. Their hermeneutic may be called with equal justification *biblical idealism* or *spiritual realism*.

[58] *Nature of NT*, 41.

[59] Max Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, selected writings, (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1995).

[60] Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

[61] *Nature of NT*, 45.

[62] *Nature of NT*, 45. Charles states: "But apocalyptic was fundamentally ethical. To use a mixed metaphor of St Paul, it was rooted and grounded in ethics, and that an ethics based on the essential righteousness of God." *Development*, 30.

text and its relevance to the present. This comparison, with British scholar Charles, sets Oman in a tradition apart from "advanced" liberalism; rather, he belongs to the tradition of spiritual realism that sees continuity between the text and contemporary reality, between then and now, Like Charles, Oman saw the roots of religion in personal communion with the immediate Living God; and the Church, when true to the apocalyptic vision of her Lord, becomes an apocalyptic community which sees the temporal in the light of the eternal, the natural in the perspective of the supernatural.

The second point of comparison is an example drawn from German scholarship, from the work of Wilhelm Baldensperger (1856-1936). Wilhelm Baldensberger published many works on the apocalyptic and the role of the apocalyptic in primitive Christianity.[63] Like Charles and Oman, Baldensperger regarded apocalyptic literature as the outcome of development within prophetic consciousness. At its best, apocalyptic vision raised religious consciousness above the particularity of national interests, freed it from material expectation of a this worldly kingdom and saw the supernatural, not as a sudden disruption of the temporal process, but as a lifting up of the historical into the transcendent. Oman summarises this transcendental perspective of apocalyptic visionaries with the following poetic expression quoted from Baldensperger:

> They dreamt of a fashioning of earthly existence into the likeness of the world of angels and the stars.[64]

It was Baldensperger's argument that the transcendental tendency in Judaism was strong and took various forms. In the pharisaic movement piety focused on conformity to the law as a preparation for the age to come. Jesus, in contrast, worked a transformation by setting the legal framework aside. In his life and teaching, apocalyptic sensibility became an entirely personal, spiritual force. Consequently, for

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[63] For a brief summary of Baldensperger's life and scholarship, see Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the investigation of its problems*, (London: SCM Press, 1970, Biographical Appendix, 466; also, "A la memoire de Guillaume Baldensperger" (1856-1936), in *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieueses*, 1936, 185-190.

[64] Quoted from W. Baldensperger, *Das Spätere Judenthem als Vorstufe des Christenthums* (Giessen: J. Richers'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1900, Page 20. see, *Divine Order*, 12

Jesus, the old contrast between the present and the future was dissolved, as was the expectation of an earthly kingdom. The transcendent reality of the Kingdom for Jesus was a present reality; and, at the same time, there was a noticeable release of Messianic expectations from the political ideals and "transference of the ideal into the supernatural".[65] This visionary aspect also helps explain departure from piety orientated on the law. The law by its nature is designed for the maintenance of a holy *community*, whereas the apocalyptic spirituality characteristic of the teaching of Jesus gave prominence to the *individual* and to the direct influence of God upon the heart. Baldensperger wrote: "The flight into the super-sensuous is with strong religious personalities inseparable from retreat into one's own heart".[66] This apocalyptic spirituality carried forward into the community of the spirit inspired by Jesus.

In *The Church and the Divine Order* continuity between Oman and Baldensperger is marked and obvious. In particular, his argument in the first chapter, "The Jewish Preparation", follows the "transformative" argument we have outlined. The Church, Oman concedes, may have had the expectation of an immediate *parousia*; but this was not dependent upon any temporal kingdom. At the core of the Church's religious sensibility was the faith inspired by Jesus that:

> faith in God's rule was no more a matter of time's accidents but an immediate sense of God which ….sustained in them the belief that love not power is the final order of the world, that indeed in the last issue love alone is irresistible might, the one thing which knows us altogether, and which in the end we shall altogether know.[67]

And so, in company with Charles and Baldensperger, Oman adopts a transformative idealism with respect to the apocalyptic. The apocalyptic ideals of later Judaism were, in the teaching of Jesus, given their most profound spiritual interpretation. Love is not an ethic that needs to be imported into a primitive metaphysic. The intuitive grasp of the cosmic significance of love for each human heart and for the

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[65] *Das Spätere*, 15. Quoted in "Judaism and the New Testament" a review of Baldensperger by H. A. A. Kennedy, *Expository Times*, Volume 12, 1900, October – September, 422-3.

[66] *Das Spätere*, 19.

[67] *Divine Order*, 15.

meaning of history animated Jesus' teaching; and it sustained the faith of his earliest followers. In Oman's reading of the New Testament, apocalyptic sensibility integrates cosmology and ethics; it links the historical Jesus with primitive community and, being essentially an insight into the ultimate nature of reality, it rescues the idea of the Kingdom of God from being a distant time-conditioned idea to that of being an existential reality. The apocalyptic is in essence a faith in "God's rule of love" and as such it was, and is, the "religious basis of the Church", a basis that "had no source but the original and undivided consciousness of Jesus, and it only continues to exist where faith is quickened and sustained by His spirit".[68] The apocalyptic ideas that Jesus used and transformed are, therefore, ever relevant to the spiritual well being of the Church, if it is to be the community of Christ.

2.3 Postscript: Oman's dissatisfaction with his own work

Most of the detailed discussion of the apocalyptic is found in *The Church and the Divine Order*. It is, however, important to note that Oman considered the book one of his "poorest efforts".[69] However, it is perhaps poverty of outcome, rather than of outlook that Oman has in mind. Healey is of the opinion that, despite the self-criticism, "the main theme of the book has an important place in an exposition of Oman's total point of view".[70] Oman may well have felt his work was insensitive to historical nuance; and even more so that, in emphasising the ideal of the Church, he did not do justice to its human reality. Certainly, this was a criticism made in review. David Frew commented in the *Expository Times*:

> The author's conception of the Church, it will thus be seen, is an ideal one – sublime enough, perhaps to inspire further developments, and true enough to be a guide and stimulus to superior souls, but probably in the present state of existence, impractical for average human nature,

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[68] *Divine Order*, 16.

[69] Healey quotes from a letter of Oman dated July 9th 1931. Oman reflects on how *The Church and the Divine Order* came to be written after his translation of Schleiermacher's *Speeches*: "Then the other books somehow seemed to come and demand to be written, all except the one on the Church which grew out of an article written to order, and it is only a very poor effort". *Religion and Reality*, Chapter iii, footnote vii, Page 160.

[70] *Religion and Reality*, 160.

> and that after all forms the great mass of the material with which the Church has to deal.[71]

One might defend Oman by repeating that his intent was to emphasise the *vision* that Jesus provided. God is personal, transcendent and loving; God is present to the human spirit, inviting participation in the work of divine renewal. The promised new heavens and the new earth of the New Testament begin in apocalyptic awareness. The human experience of the righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit heralds coming cosmic renewal. The existence of the Church is a sign of the final sanctification of the world through renunciation of human possession and the acceptance of the world as God's gift. The inclusiveness of Oman's vision rescues him from the charge of "superior" individualism.

Summary

This section has sought to contextualise Oman's theology of the apocalyptic and to show its relevance to his ecclesiology. Historical study of eschatology in the nineteenth century proved a challenge to traditional belief, especially the work of Weiss and Schweitzer who posited an apocalyptic Jesus. In the twentieth century, however, theologians returned to the theme of eschatology; and, linking it to the resurrection, found it to be a fruitful field for Christology. Oman stands outside this perspective. In continuity with a tradition found in scholars such as Charles in Britain and Baldensperger in Germany, Oman emphasised the apocalyptic aspect of eschatology as a religious insight into the meaning of the universe as both a material and spiritual reality. Jesus was not a mistaken millennialist, but rather a seer and prophet perceiving the ultimate meaning of the world in God. The Church stands in continuity with Jesus as a community that lives in openness and hope, trusting only in the power of God to renew the earth, through freedom, love and holiness. Oman would have endorsed the words of Charles, that the apocalyptic "speaking historically, was the parent of Christianity"[72]; and, with Charles, Oman saw

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[71] David Frew, Review of *The Church and the Divine Order* in the *Hibbert Journal* 1911-12, Volume VII, 629.

[72] *Religious Development*, 35.

apocalyptic consciousness as vital to on-going Christianity and to the authenticity of the Church of Christ.

3 The Church in an evolutionary paradigm

If the apocalyptic may be thought of as the classical intellectual architecture of Oman's ecclesiology, then, evolution may be considered as ecclesiology in a modern architectural idiom. As noted in chapter four, for Oman, evolution is a spiritual concept. The moral and spiritual catastrophe that apocalyptic insight prophesies may be thought of as failure to adapt to the spiritual order which is the ultimate environment of all life. In the physical environment there is vast evolutionary waste; and in the spiritual environment there are consequences to choice no less perilous. Sin is not merely transgression, but radical evil, a defiance of spiritual realities. Oman sums this parallel as follows:

> Thus sin is just the higher aspect of all failure of life to lay itself open to the witness of its environment and to brace itself to venture upon it; and the difference from any other evolution is in the environment of absolute quality of which man has become conscious and in which he may realise in himself absolute worth and failure as absolute loss.[Break] Sin, therefore, is used for anything which comes from seeking the perfect order in absolute conscientiousness, or in other words the whole mind of God, known or unknown.[73]

Spiritual environment gives no respite from duty and discipline; and these are all the more unrelenting in that no law can give them adequate expression. Were it not for the reality of God's patient love, unlimited forgiveness and his will to bring creation through pain to new creation, then the moral and religious imperatives would be more indicative of a cruel task master than a loving Father. The positive corollary is that, in every human advance in freedom, love and holiness, the sanctification of the world is a step closer to realisation. Oman sees the growth in humanity of freedom, love and holiness as presaging the renewal of all of creation. The "Kingdom of God", he writes,

> Is not concerned merely or even mainly with the things we call sacred, but is the transformation of man first and, through this great change, of

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[73] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 328-329.

> all his surroundings, even to the material nature which is now his foe only because of anxiety on the one hand and misuse on the other.[74]

Of this all-encompassing spiritual renewal, of humanity and creation, the Cross remains both the ultimate sign and supreme inspiration; indeed, for Oman, the Cross points to the *only way* whereby human beings may adapt to their ultimate spiritual environment. At the end of *Vision and Authority*, Oman repeatedly links the Church to the evolutionary and the spiritual significance of the Cross.

> The supreme task before the Church is to learn from the power of the Cross. It introduces a new religious order; and this brings in its train a new political, social and religious order. If we care to use such language, we can speak of a new stage in development, the introduction of a new principle of evolution. The individual struggle may still go on. There may be selection of the fittest. But the fitness is not mere strength to seek and devour prey. It is the freedom of self restraint, regard for others, submission to the guidance of love, in short it is fitness for our place in God's final order.[75]

It is an inspiring vision, particularly in accord with the theology of St Paul, where creation awaits the manifestation of the sons and daughters of God;[76] and where the renewal of the human spirit is the forerunner of the renewal of the whole of creation. As Oman remarked, the Apostle "was something of an evolutionist".[77]

In this evolutionary paradigm, the Church has a high calling, not to save itself but to be a sign of salvation, not to reform the world on the world's terms but to point the world to the Kingdom of God, the final order of freedom and love. Oman's evolutionary perspective was another factor in the subsidiary place given to institutional structures. Human history in the macro scale of evolution is miniscule and the part cannot determine the whole. Faith has a wider horizon and truer spiritual belonging than either history or institutions can embody or express. As he commented: "the earth is not merely as a material particle in endless space but is of

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[74] *Vision and Authority*, 334. The sanctification of creation through human sanctification is reminiscent of Teilhard de Chardin; See. Teilhard de Chardiin, *Hymn of the Universe*, (London: Collins, 1965).

[75] *Vision and Authority*, 333.

[76] Romans Ch 8:18-25.

[77] *Grace and Personality*, 275.

"vast spiritual importance".[78] In the grand horizon of spiritual reality, the particularities of ecclesiology are of value only as they serve ends beyond themselves. The Church, therefore, when true to its calling, is always liminal, between heaven and earth, apocalyptic and evolutionary. The Church is institutional only as a necessity of historical existence; its true being is found, not in history, but in the service the transcendent order of freedom and love. Though Oman felt the inadequacies of his labours in *The Church and the Divine Order*, he never departed from the assertion:

> In some order of love and freedom, that is in some kind of Church, the historic struggle of mankind must be gathered up, and even if it is not being served by the present Churches, then a supreme effort should be made to call them to their task.[79]

Summary

This section re-visited Oman's idea of evolution as a spiritual process. The Church stands in a continuum which stretches from a primordial past, through a process of development to the self-conscious imperatives of the present. Institutions are the fruit of human adaption to the natural and supernatural, to the challenges of environment both material and spiritual Human history is minute on an evolutionary scale; however, it is the field where the seed of the Kingdom is consciously sown, though it is God who provides the harvest.

At the Cross, a definitive evolutionary step was taken and a new principle of evolution revealed. Love, not self-love, belongs to the final order of things and it is the end to which creation moves. The Church is the community that realises in its fellowship the power of the age to come, the power of love that sanctifies life and presages the sanctification of Creation.[80]

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[78] *Vision and Authority*, 42.

[79] *Divine Order*, Preface vii.

[80] "…an inheritance, that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept for you in heaven." 1st Peter 1:4. For Oman, heaven is not a distant reality discontinuous with the present, but rather the reality that is part of human consciousness in the here and now, though ever to be more fully realised in the transcendent realm of freedom and love.

4 German nexus

To contextualise Oman in the field of ecclesiology is not an easy matter. In the preface to *The Church and the Divine Order* he confesses that many influences may have been unconscious. "Perhaps" he adds, "I should emphasize my obligation to Sohm and Loofs. Next to them I am indebted to many discussions with my colleague, Principal Skinner, than to any writer on the subject."[81] As noted in the previous chapter, John Skinner was an Old Testament scholar, Principal at Westminster College, and obviously he was deeply concerned about the Church. Oman gives no indication of what his discussion with Skinner entailed. Oman quotes Loofs twice; once to the effect that the Roman Catholic understanding of authority in faith and morals can never bear the fruit of radical freedom inherent in the gospel; the other highlights the abiding influence of neo-platonism in Augustine's writings.[82] Friedrich Loofs was professor of Church History at Halle from 1888-1927. He was a pastor and social activist. Loofs' academic interest was mainly patristic; but he also had an interest in the history of dogma. He has been regarded as a *sui generis* theologian who sought to combine piety with modernity.[83] This is, perhaps, the point at which their thinking joins. Both Oman and Loofs emphasised the Reformation as the re-discovery of the freedom in Christ, each had an aversion to speculative Christology[84] and both considered that the essence of the Church lies not in institutional expression, but in the quality of the fellowship that it engenders. The primitive Church, drawing its inspiration from Jesus, was not a hierarchical community but one of mutual service. In a University sermon on the Holy Trinity,

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[81] *Divine Order*, Preface vii.

[82] *Divine Order*, 149 and 170.

[83] "Loofs' Vermittlung zwischen Tradition und Moderne besasz, „ein konservatives und ein revolutionäres Element", *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Band xxi, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991), 464-466. Loofs' work was reviewed in the *Expository Times* in the late nineteenth century. See, Review of "Loofs' Symbolik" by J. G Tasker, Volume 14,1902-1903, 27; Review of "Dr Loofs' Outline of Church History" by J. G. Tasker, Volume 12, 1900- 1901, 254 and "Friedrich Loofs" by R. W. Slater Volume 1, 1895, 152-4. A recent publication in German, *Friedrich Loofs in Halle* edited Jörg Ulrich (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), reiterates the difficulty in categorizing Loofs. "Alle Versuche, ihn als conservative Liberalen oder liberalen Konserativen zu beschreiben, sind natürlich nicht ganz falsch, aber nicht sehr hilfriech". Vorwort, 20.

[84] Both had a particular aversion to a kenotic understanding of the incarnation: "It is mythology, not theology that is at the root of this theory" Friedrich Loofs, *What is the truth about Jesus Christ?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913), 226.

Loofs' conceded that the Holy Spirit may work through the Holy Catholic Church; but; the Church is not thereby endorsed in an institutional sense; "it is not an outward and visible organisation: it is a fellowship of believers".[85] That the Church is essentially a fellowship of believers is elemental to Oman's belief that the Church "catholic" is found wherever two or three meet in Christ's name;[86] and central, also, to his subordination of structure to personal relations.

Oman gives more references with respect to Sohm, especially in the area of transition from the apostolic community to early Catholicism. Sohm was a pioneer of the view that the early apostolic community was charismatic in nature and that the concept of legal authority was a later intrusion. Sohm's thesis provoked heated debate which still echoes to-day. Rudolf Sohm (1841-1917) was professor of legal history at Leipzig from 1887 and his specialism was in Roman law, before turning his attention to Church law.[87] His famous monograph, *Kirchenrecht,* was published in 1892 and a second Volume posthumously in 1922.[88] In summary, Sohm's thesis was "being charismatic in origin and nature, the Church is a spiritual and supernatural entity, independent of any human, ecclesiastical organisation and, therefore, free from any human law."[89] In practice, this meant that in the early Christian community there was no governing office and leadership was by those spiritually gifted; apostles, prophets and teachers.[90] It was only in the post apostolic period that bishops were allowed to become office holders, changing spiritual endowment into a power inherent in permanent office.

Enrique Nardoni, writing from a Catholic ecumenical perspective, gives a good overview of the reaction to Sohm's thesis. Historians did not refute Sohm's thesis,

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[85] Quoted in article, "Friedrich Loofs", 153.

[86] Matthew 18: 20

[87] Biographical and bibliographical details are given in a substantive entry in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie Band xxi,* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), 464-466. See also, Rudolph Sohm, *Outlines of Church History* translated by May Sinclair (London: Macmillan & Co, 1895).

[88] Rudolph Sohm, *Kirchenrecht 1: Die geschichtlichen Grundlagan* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1892). For discussion of Sohm see, T. D. Dougherty, "Sohm, Rudolf" *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 13 (1967) 413; and especially Enrique Nardoni, "Charism in the early Church since Rudolf Sohm: An ecumenical challenge", *Theological Studies* 53 (1992), 646-662.

[89] "Charism", 647.

[90] 1st Corinthians 12: 28; Acts 13: 2-3.

but sought to soften and limit it in various ways. For example, Adolf von Harnack, in a long article in *Protestantische Realenzyclopädie*, drew upon the image of the Church in the *Didache* and argued for two parallel ecclesiastical organisations; one universal and charismatic, the other local and administrative Charism.[91] In the twentieth century, Hans von Campenhausen, in his *Ecclesiatical Authority,*[92] argued for the existence of a non-charismatic Jewish Church in Jerusalem and for the existence of Pauline Churches, "characterised by total exclusion of any human order or authority, entirely under the sway of the Spirit".[93] The issue was also taken up by Ernst Käsemann,[94] who argued for continuity between Paul and early Catholicism with regard to the sacraments, but for discontinuity with respect to office and authority.

Nardoni comments that Sohm's thesis was substantially supported by Protestant scholars. Also, Catholic scholars, since Vatican II, have sought a synthesis of the charismatic and the legal. Indeed, all Catholic scholars since Vatican II have shared the conviction that "Paul initiated a pneumatological approach to the Church which is of immense significance".[95] Nardoni, strangely, makes no reference to Barth. In *Church Dogmatics* Barth makes an uncompromising attack on Sohm's thesis and has as his targets both Sohm and Emil Brunner. Brunner accepted the premise that the Church was, and is, essentially a spiritual community. Barth, in a way consistent with the rest of this thought, gave his criticism Christological grounding.

> The terms used by Rudolph Sohm and Emil Brunner after him to describe the essence of the Christian community, evade the Christological question and answer. As they see, the Church is a spiritual and voluntary community, the Church of love and faith (invisible according to Sohm). Or, according to Brunner, it is a "pure fellowship of persons, a fellowship of brothers, or a living fellowship.

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[91] "Charism" 649; *Protestantische Realenzyklopädie für Theologie und kirche Volume* 20 (1908), 508-46.

[92] Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power*, translated J. A. Baker (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1969).The German edition was published in 1953.

[93] *Charism*, 650.

[94] Ernst Käsemann, "Ministry and Communion in the New Testament", *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM,1964).

[95] *Charism*, 662.

> What Brunner calls the fellowship of Christ does not differ in substance from what Sohm calls the spiritual Church and the Church of love. For him too, Christ is a predicate of the Christian community and not vice versa.[96]

Contrary to his opponents, Barth places law at the centre of the Church, namely the law of Christ. The Church is a "Christocracy" a "fellowship of law, a fellowship ordered by the superior law of Jesus Christ".[97] Barth believed that in Sohm's thesis the terms 'spirit', 'voluntariness' etc, supplanted the law of Christ. In fact, the most damaging feature was that they were used "at the decisive point where reference should be specifically to Jesus Christ".[98]

Barth's sharp criticisms might well be directed towards Oman, as against Sohm and Brunner. Yet, paradoxically, Oman's concept of the atoning rule of God revealed through the Cross, though different from Barth's dogmatic concentration, draws the sting from Barth's criticism. Barth's fears, born of experience, that the Church may keel over when it needs to stand up to evil, can be alleviated by Oman's alternate theological vision of the Church. Oman's central idea of the Kingdom of God, as the rule of atoning love, offers no evasion from the evils of the world. The Cross faces the darkness of evil; and the Church, when it embraces the Cross, shares in Christ's suffering and victory. Perhaps Oman's totally Cross-centred view of the Church's life is only semantically different from Barth's concept of the Church as a "Christocracy". The premises of Oman's theology and those of Barth may be diametrically opposed, but in praxis, in the call to faithful witness, both find the word of God in the Cross.

4.1 Oman and Sohm

Oman comments that, in relation to the development of the institutions of Catholic Christianity, whether one agrees with him or not, "every serious student of the

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[96] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume IV/II, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 679. Barth is quoting from Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952), 10, 17, 84 and 110.

[97] *Dogmatics*, 681.

[98] *Dogmatics*, 681.

subject must take account of Sohm's explanation".[99] In effect, Oman is too eclectic a thinker to put all his eggs in Sohm's ecclesial basket and he draws upon other scholars, not only Loofs, but Edwin Hatch[100] and Adolf von Harnack.[101] His relation to Sohm might be termed "qualified acceptance". With regard to the specifics of historical development in the early centuries, Oman took issue with Sohm at various points. He did not accept Sohm's view that there was a distinction in the apostolic community between elders and bishops and that the community did not have corporate and representative governance. More importantly, he did not accept Sohm's juxtaposition of spiritual gifts and legal authority. In relation to the last point, he felt that Sohm had imported into the concept of authority the monarchical idea of the ruler and subject. Nothing could, however, be further from the lordship of Christ. Sohm had failed to see the *kind* of power that Christ exercised, a power which, through the continuation of his spirit, the apostolic community also exercised. Spiritual authority is to be first in service and last in pre-eminence; authority means ruling with the patient love of the Cross, with the assurance of the final vindication of resurrection. Therefore, Oman argues, the spiritual, charismatic nature of the Christian community in the apostolic age need not be at odds with the "law" of Christ. Christ's law is the law of love, authoritative as it is personal.

Another point of departure from Sohm is found in Oman's attitude to the institutional Church. Sohm had much more hope that the Church may be renewed through its institutions rather than in spite of them. In his *Outlines of Church History,* Sohm gives his prognosis for the future of Christianity in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century. He feared that the materialist philosophies, predicated upon evolution, were inimical to the future of faith, at least in the short term. There is no sense, as with Oman, that evolution is capable of spiritual interpretation. Sohm builds his hope on the Confessional movement, as well as the positive side of the

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[99] *Divine Order*, 88.

[100] Edwin Hatch (1835-1899) Amongst other works contributed *The Growth of Church Institutions* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1887).

[101] Adolf von Harnack was prolific in the fields of New Testament, Dogmatics and Church History. A starting point to his work is *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904-5).

movements for Protestant Church unity. Whilst Oman recognised the value of renewal movements, we need only read his strictures on the Oxford movement and his lukewarm acceptance of the union of the United Presbyterian and the Free Church of Scotland,[102] to see that his vision and hopes for renewal were not focused on institutional recovery. In 1928 he wrote:

> All forms of religious worship may suffer by the shaking of the old foundations. The churches may undergo a period of eclipse. As now, constituted, none may come unchanged through the crisis. But all search for God's ultimate authoritative word to man is vain, till we know that the cause of the Churches is not the cause of religion, however ultimately they may be allied, and till we know that the Kingdom of God is not forwarded by a great deal that exists conspicuously in all churches.[103]

Oman's apocalyptic sense of history and the evolutionary trajectory of his thought gave birth to more radical thinking. He was more iconoclastic with regard to institutions than Sohm; and more radical in his expectations. Oman's sights are not on tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, but upon the long vistas of the ages. In Sohm we have a sense of spiritual crisis in Europe and in Oman a similar recognition of the encroaching secular reality; but, with Oman, there is the hope that calamity will bring in its wake not renaissance of historic faith but spiritual awakening beyond mere institutional renewal. The expectation is for new wineskins as well as new wine.

In the end, historical contextualisation of Oman's ecclesial vision is frustrated by the prevalence of his ideal of the church over its historical reality. If one were to pinpoint the role of history in Oman's ecclesiology, it would be that through the New Testament we have the primal vision of Jesus and the record of the practice of that ideal in the primitive Church. The primal, apocalyptic vision must be taken up afresh in obedience to the call of the present. Oman was under no illusion about the

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[102] For Oman's critical approach to the Oxford Movement see "The Revolution and Newman's Apologia, Lecture VI, in *Faith and Freedom*; his questioning attitude to the union of the United Presbyterian Church and the Free Church of Scotland in 1900 is expressed in *Divine Order*, 303. Oman's concern was that the newly created United Free Church should rely only on "spiritual influences" and not on its dominant position in society.

[103] *Vision and Authority*, 349.

momentousness of this undertaking for each new generation; but, it is a task incumbent upon the Church. There is infinite distance between the world and God that can be bridged only by the freedom of human response to the love of the Cross. Love is both nurture and fire. The patience of God will not coerce: but, neither will the holiness of love leave the Church in a state of inertia; it is ever being tested by fire. For Oman, testing by fire may take two forms: "it may be the fire of persecution or the fire of doubt".[104] The second of these, Oman felt, was well on its way. It was not a cause for retreat, but for expectation of a new thing that the Lord might do. Oman's thought takes flight from history in order to disabuse it of absolute claims and, paradoxically, in order that the transcendent call of God may be discovered in and through it. As ever, the natural is known through the supernatural and the supernatural irreducible to the natural.

Summary

This section has sought an historical context for Oman's ecclesiology. His theology of the Church bears some resemblance to those of Loofs and Sohm. They share the belief that primitive Christian community was a fellowship, directed by the spirit, under the rule of love. Oman and Sohm differed as to points of historical detail and his evaluation of historical development in subsequent centuries takes a more radical trajectory. In the historiography of Church history, Oman stands out in his adherence to the ideal Church over the empirical. The consequence of his idealism was a radical iconoclasm with respect to the claims of historical institutions. Oman's radical ecclesiology is in proportion to his vision of the Church as a work in progress, in an evolutionary continuum, in an apocalyptic horizon and in the providence of God.

5 Institutions, ministry and sacraments

The foregoing section has explored the foundations of Oman's ecclesiology in apocalyptic sensibility and an evolutionary world view followed by an examination of nineteenth century context. The next section will consider Oman's attitude to

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[104] *Vision and Authority*, 272.

ecclesiastical specifics: Church organisation, the function of ministry and the place of sacraments.

5.1 Institutions

The Church always manifests itself in some form of community, even if it is two or three gathered in Christ's name. At the same time, it is impossible to think of the Church as a separate entity from the world. The "true Church", Oman writes:

> …cannot be separated out from among men, gathered into one pure society, organised according to the Divine ideal, and directed exclusively to Christ like activities, because the Kingdom of God she serves cannot be so separated and distinguished. The things of the spirit and the things of the flesh cannot be separated even in one soul.[105]

The old conundrum of whether the church is visible or invisible does not arise. The Church is visible when it is leaven in the dough. However, as dough it can make no lasting claim to empirical durability. The true Church is the ideal Church that embodies the values of the Kingdom of God and reflects the light of Christ in the world. Oman continues:

> All else passes; and if any part of our experience has entirely failed to leave some result of faith and hope and love we have lived in vain. Therefore, the work of any Church is in vain which is not helping to rear the eternal Church in which these spiritual goods are the true and abiding possession; and which is not hastening on the day when other bonds are unnecessary, because all are one in Christ.[106]

It is thus that Oman introduces the reader to an ecclesiology, idealist and visionary, and empirically variable. Institutions, no matter how revered, are "at best an imperfect and passing means".[107] The corollary of this transience is that Oman is appreciative of the potential for any ecclesial institution to be a vehicle for the divine. Thus, with respect to the Confessional movement in nineteenth century Germany, he commented: "what gave it vitality was the revival of practical religion which passed,

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[105] *Vision and Authority*, 345.

[106] *Vision and Authority*, 346.

[107] *Honest Religion*, 168.

not over Germany alone, but over a good part of Western Europe".[108] On the other hand, the merit of his own non-conformist tradition lay, he believed, in the personal freedom and responsibility it gave to the individual. "The temper of non-conformity is to have a large faith in the self-direction of the human soul, and a relatively small faith in human regulations."[109] It is "the temper" of non-conformity that commends it to Oman; not its democratic structure *per se*. "Christianity is not individualism tempered by the ballot-box" and "Christ has little flattering to say about majorities".[110] The more any Church leans towards personal freedom, the more it is of the world to come; the more it rests upon history and tradition, the more it will quench the Spirit and lose its dynamism. Oman pointedly sums up the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom of God as follows:

> The whole question is, whether the Church is a prophetic society because it is historic, or a historic society because it is prophetic. Only on the latter belief can the organisation be thought subordinate to the spirit.[111]

Oman's ecclesiology represents the triumph of a biblical idealism, though without detachment from the empirical. As in his Christology, the mediating influences of Scottish philosophy are apparent and his theology of the Church illustrates the application of his *via media* between idealism and realism.

Of primary importance to Oman is the question: what sort of authority do Churches exercise? If the Kingdom of God is an order of freedom and love then this must be reflected to the maximum degree possible in church life. Personal insight must take precedence over every outward authority. And, even though Churches by their very nature are corporate, the corporate must make space for the freedom of the individual. "The help of others is essential, but the authority of others is stagnation."[112] Oman sees a parallel between religion and science where the human

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[108] *Faith and Freedom*, 344.

[109] *Dialogue with God*, 154.

[110] *Divine Order*, 318.

[111] *Divine Order*, 320.

[112] *Vision and Authority*, 47.

search for knowledge "must regard only truth".[113] The same realism is required in religion, namely a belief that reality will not deceive the earnest seeker. The search for God must be "in humble freedom, with a far higher assurance than the material world can give, than that which he seeks is active to make its self known".[114] Thus, the spiritual person "has at once the child's modesty and the child's confidence".[115] It is an approach which counters the criticism that religion is based on archaic authority and unable to amend, change or learn anything new. This personal emphasis may make high demands upon the individual; but the other side of the argument is that there are no religious elites. A Galilee peasant may discover more truth than the learned teachers of the law; and the discriminating mind may see "in the woman old and poor, in the threadbare gown and the old fashioned bonnet, the beauty of holiness and the dignity of Christ's gentleness, and be able to treat her in every relation of life as the guest who has been honoured to sit at Christ's right hand".[116]

The ability of each soul to know God directly and in ways transcending institutional authority was always, for Oman, fundamental. His spirituality was highly person-centred, and his understanding of the Church was built from the bottom up. The Church's sure foundation is one soul open to the reality of the divine. Oman appeals to Jesus in the gospels as an example of this conviction in practice:

> We must begin as far back as our Lord did. All His beginnings are with individuals. The only condition of acceptance is to worship in spirit and in truth. One person in his heart worships God, and to this no increase of numbers, no consecrated building or large assembly can add anything. For our own assurance in this approach, the revelation of the Father testifying to the Son, and the revelation of the Son witnessing to the Father are adequate grounds.[117]

From the personal inevitably follows the inter-personal. The Church begins when the two worshipping hearts come together. Oman continues: "The Church of Christ has not begun till two have met in Christ's name, till, in the simplest act of association,

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[113] Vision and Authority, 47.

[114] *Vision and Authority*, 47.

[115] *Vision and Authority*, 47.

[116] *Vision and Authority*, 170.

[117] *Vision and Authority*, 139.

the spirit of fellowship that is in Him has found expression".[118] And with the beginning of fellowship, in the name and faith and love of Christ, there is no end to its widening circle. The two are never content until they become three and "the spirit of love that is in Him has begun to enlarge its sphere of blessing".[119] However, given that the essence of the Church is in the quality of its fellowship, expansion can never make it more catholic than the primary fellowship of the two or three. Indeed, no earthly institution can exhaust the heavenly reality of the Church. "It is an atom, but an atom which holds in potentiality the glory of the universe."[120]

It would be a misnomer, therefore, to say that Oman has a low view of the Church. Yes, it is low if historical continuity, or liturgical antiquity, be the yardstick; but, if vision of what the Church may become is the measure, then Oman's ecclesiology is of the highest order. His bottom-up thinking is full of possibility, the possibility of realising the height, and depth, the breadth and length of the love of Christ, as well as the fullness of God that surpasses all knowledge.[121] Worship and fellowship in Christ's name connect with the love at the heart of all reality. And so, existentially, the outcome of Oman's apocalyptic and evolutionary parameters is that there can be no institutional ceiling to truth or love. In practice, any soul that lives consciously in the sphere of the spiritual may witness to the reality of God, and more authentically than the most illustrious ecclesiastical tradition, or prestigious Church.

> The man who works in this sphere is a true Church builder. His scope may be small, his Church may be only a friend, a family, a hamlet observant of his walk and conversation. But eternity is before him, and quality is all and quantity is naught, and eternity not time will be his vindication.[122]

By accumulative argument, Oman brings home to the reader his unwavering, perhaps one might say unrelenting, conviction of the primacy of God in the personal experience of ordinary people and the corresponding secondary role of ecclesiastical

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[118] *Vision and Authority*, 139.

[119] *Vision and Authority*, 140.

[120] *Vision and Authority*, 140.

[121] Ephesians 3:18

[122] *Vision and Authority*, 349.

institutions. The point is summed up as follows: "the first and last question for every Church concerns men, not institutions. They are the building the rest is all scaffolding".[123]

Oman made these remarks in his revised edition of *Vision and Authority*, published in 1928, and one cannot help thinking that he may have had the prior criticism of his ecclesiology in mind. Frew, as noted, reviewed *The Church and the Divine Order* with the comment that Oman pitched the reality of the Church so highly that his vision "is impractical for average human nature".[124] And so, in his re-issue of *Vision and Authority*, Oman places the Church in the heart of human nature and in personal relations. He is at pains to show that both Christian life and fellowship are essentially rooted in the transcendental possibilities of ordinary human beings. However, in 2007, R. Buick Knox revisited and repeated the criticism. Knox was Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Westminster College[125] and, in his history of the College, remarked:

> For many people the institutional and traditional structure provided the necessary framework for personal faith and 'now and again Oman tends to put asunder what God has joined'.[126]

Like Frew, a hundred years earlier, Knox's criticism was that Oman failed to recognise the importance of the concrete realities for faith and took an unhelpful flight into the idealism. Knox's affirmation of the importance for faith of the particularity of tradition and settled liturgy undoubtedly carries weight. Oman himself concedes that "as long as we are in the body, we cannot be independent of forms and organisations and ceremonies, and customs in respect to them…no one maintains a robust religious life unconnected with any of them.[127] The foundational premise of Oman's theology that the natural and the supernatural are always

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[123] *Vision and Authority*, 349.

[124] Op cite.

[125] 1968-1985.

[126] R. Buick Knox, *Westminster College, Cambridge: Its Background and History* (Published by Westminster College, Cambridge), 25. Interestingly, this citation is from the *Presbyterian Messenger*, 1915, 428-429.

[127] *Honest Religious*, 170-171.

interrelated could not but acknowledge the importance of institutions. His critics failed to see this connection. Oman's trenchant criticism of institutional religion, therefore, was qualified. It is the backward glance of institutions that troubled him. Once organisations turn inwards to their historical credentials, or their illustrious past, then – in a manner analogous to a self-focused, spiritual life in individuals – they become more self-righteous than righteous. Institutions fail when inward looking; but, on the other hand, they serve God's purpose and human need when open to the beckoning of heaven.

> …customs and institutions by themselves are apt to fail when most needed, yet, if not by themselves but sought for purposes beyond themselves, they may be our required succour: and honesty with our limitations should compel us to admit the need.[128]

In Oman's evolutionary, apocalyptic trajectory everything lives through openness to the transcendent, "by every word that comes from the mouth of God".[129] His criticism is not of customs and institutions *per se*, but of those which domesticate transcendence. And so, as Oman stood at the crossroads of declining religious practice, his fear was that the forms of religion would continue, but with a dangerous severance from reality. Knox's criticism misses this seminal point. At the micro, personal, pastoral level, Oman would have welcomed Knox's insight into the fact that there is no such thing as faith divorced from context. But, in the larger context of religious decline, Oman was attempting to find a vision consistent with the primal vision given by Jesus. Institutional maintenance, valuable in its own right, is never pregnant with vision. Oman's faith over-reached the institutional to the ideal, with the trust that the divine is always becoming manifest in new and unexpected ways. The human requirement is ever the trust of the child and the vision of the poet. Oman must have the felt the weight of isolation on this matter. It is a singularly "Oman vision", that the future of the Church lies with new apocalyptic sensibility. Theological thinking on the subject of Church decline, in Oman's era as to-day, was committed to reform and renewal of current institutions. Any providential possibility of post-institutional Christianity was ruled out a priori.

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[128] *Honest Religion*, 171.

[129] Matthew 4:4

> Instead of seeking life first and waiting till it create its own regulation, the hope is that regulations will do as well as life. That some larger idea should be working out in the universe than in any actual organisation, even one's own is a hypothesis beyond the working theory.[130]

One senses that Oman caught the spirit of secular Christianity that was to come in the nineteen sixties. But it also would have been too earth-bound. Oman's kindred spirits are, perhaps, those who today emphasise the spirituality of nature; and who, taking the Christian vision beyond the Church doors, seek a spiritual meaning for the cosmos.[131]

5.2 Ministry and people

Oman writes about ministry from within his non-conformist perspective. In the previous chapter, the quotation from his paper given to minsters, entitled "The Exposition of the Word", illustrated how exclusively Oman identified ministry with preaching. To repeat:

> Knowledge of the scriptures is the true qualification of the minister. He no longer assumes to absolve sin; he only dispenses sacraments because it is convenient; he cannot claim superior piety or superior gifts, or experience of men and of life, but he ought to be able to say as none of his other hearers can: 'Thus said Isaiah' and 'Thus said Paul' and 'Thus said the Lord Himself', and if he wants to find a better commission he is hard indeed to please.[132]

The quotation is as revealing for what it rejects as for what it affirms. The priesthood of all believers is written large upon it. Any idea of the minister giving absolution is ruled out axiomatically and the reference to administering the sacraments as a matter of "convenience" suggests that, for Oman, presiding at the Lord's Table or administering baptism might well be carried out by a lay person. Indeed, from an accompanying sermon entitled "Presbyterianism", it is clear that Oman rejects the idea of a lay-clerical distinction. The sermon was preached at an ordination of elders

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[130] *Vision and Authority*, 279.

[131] Judy Cannato, *Field of Compassion: How the new cosmology is transforming spiritual life* (Notre Dame, USA: Sorin Books, 2010). Cannato appeals to the theology of Rahner as a theologian who saw the Christian faith in an evolutionary perspective. Oman's spiritual view of evolution could, likewise, prove a creative springboard for a spirituality of nature.

[132] *Dialogue with God*, 146.

and the script is couched in the most charitable language. He affirms his belief in "the holy Catholic Church, in the deep and true sense of recognising all faithful followers of Christ by what ever name they be called", and continues, "it would be our constant endeavour to enlarge our charity".[133] However, Oman takes the opportunity to repudiate all hierarchy. He argues for the equivalence of the terms elder and bishop and for the eldership as a representative, speaking "from the midst of the people" in contra-distinction to a bishop who "speaks above the people".[134] It is, he concludes, "the real intention of Catholicism in all its phases" that "the Church proper is the clergy". [135] It was unlikely to have been an ecumenical occasion, beyond, perhaps, the inclusion of other non-conformist clergy. Had he lived in the post war era, it would have been interesting to see how Oman would have reacted to Vatican II and the concept of the ministry of the whole people of God.[136] Perhaps, he would have welcomed it as a step in the right direction; but it would hardly have gained fulsome acceptance. The claim to authority in faith and morals of the Vatican Council itself would have been a stumbling block to Oman's conscience. He concludes his address to the elders and congregation:

> Nothing, we hold, has done more to mislead men about Christ than this notion that His Church can consist of officials and that His faith can be taught from outside, and a man's conduct directed by any authority than God's spirit in his heart.[137]

All authority is vested in individual conscience in the fellowship of Christ. In keeping with his relational Christology, he affirms:

> Those of us who are Elders magnify our office because we magnify the first great office, which is to be a brother of Jesus Christ, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, because we magnify the priesthood of all believers – as a royal priesthood. There is no dignity that can be higher than theirs, no way of knowing the truth that is surer than their gift of

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[133] *Dialogue with God*, 140.

[134] *Dialogue with God*, 142.

[135] *Dialogue with God*, 142.

[136] *Lumen Gentium*: Chapter 4

[137] *Dialogue with God*, 143.

> God's spirit, no way of approaching the throne of grace than their way of united intercession.[138]

"United intercession" suggests a Presbyterianism that is corporate, yet honouring of individual conscience. It is an idealised Presbyterianism, free from legalism and clericalism; and, maybe, more free from lay power struggles than Presbyterianism ever is in reality. In any event, the importance of the Church as "people" stretches further back than any one Church tradition. "It is not in the last issue" he writes, "for Presbyterianism that we stand, but for Christianity and we would be far from any assertion that would un-church others. Our main task is to preach Christ and to make manifest our fellowship with all them who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity".[139]

With respect to ministry, Oman's valuable practical guide, *Concerning the Ministry*, a compendium of casual Saturday afternoon talks, delivered when Oman had ended his week's lecturing, re-affirms Oman's belief that preaching is the minister's fundamental calling. The book is rich in insight into the pitfalls in the minister's vocation, stressing the evils of busyness and many of the things that are now emphasised in ministerial formation. Many practical insights arise from Oman's eighteen years experience in Alnwick. These are delivered with wit and are always challenging. Even in 1979, the book was required reading for ministers in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.[140] The most noticeable thing about this book, however, is the exclusive emphasis on the minister as a preacher. There are pastoral asides, but the core of the book is concerned with homiletics. The early chapters address the issue of the minister being a prophet of the people and to the people. The whole series of talks is premised on the ministry being one of reconciliation. The primary purpose of the ministry is to follow the "long way" of bringing people to the realisation of the friendship of God and to trust in his wisdom and love, commended in the Cross. There are many other "shorter" ways of serving the Kingdom as, for

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[138] *Dialogue with God*, 143-144.

[139] *Dialogue with God*, 140.

[140] This was the author's personal experience as a student for the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

example, a social worker or as a member of parliament.[141] But the vocation of ministry is premised on the belief that only reconciliation to God can ultimately "make a better people and a better world".[142] Oman's affirmation of reconciliation to God as the only ground for ministry, and of Christianity itself, is left as a challenge which has no ambivalence.

> Perhaps no-one has any right to be in the ministry at all unless he is quite convinced, not only of the value of this way, but that there is no other way. Perhaps no one is quite a Christian who is not.[143]

Thus, as in all Oman's free ranging theological thinking, his reflections on ministry come ultimately to focus on the Cross where Christ manifests in time God's eternal, atoning love. The Christian ministry, like Christianity itself, rests on the reality of reconciliation to God through the same Christ and the same love.

5.3 Sacraments

There is little about sacraments in Oman's published work and yet the premise of his theology is fundamentally sacramental. The natural world is symbolic of the spiritual; the supernatural is apprehended through the natural. In comparison with the sacramental lavishness of creation, attempts by the Church to create an exclusive sacramental system are flying in the face of God's glorious provision. These points are expressed in Oman's Kerr Lectures; and, in this instance, he makes little allowance for Catholic sensitivities. He writes:

> The Roman system, being the work of many centuries, has, in a high degree, the rounded completeness…….Yet it is only a narrow interpretation of God's ways, for, if the whole world is a sacrament of things spiritual, the sacraments of the Church must be great symbols laden with a world of meaning, but to narrow the sacramental efficacy of all material creation down to the narrow wonder-working of material substance debases and does not glorify the idea. Nor is the highest way to place the sacramental idea in the material world at all, for its ultimate symbol is man not nature, and the fundamental error is the denial of that

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[141] *Concerning the Ministry*, 10. The opening chapter, "The Choice of Ways", is especially pertinent as a vocational guide.

[142] *Concerning the Ministry*, 51.

[143] *Concerning the Ministry*, 51.

> liberty upon which that sacramental importance of humanity depends.[144]

The essential sacrament of the universe is the human spirit. In human consciousness the material and the spiritual meet as nowhere else.[145] In his lecture notes, Oman comments:

> There is only one sacrament in the last issue which is life. Sacraments are really the crown and perfecting of this continual revelation, showing us by the very simplest symbols that God speaks to us in all of life.[146]

Thus, the sacraments of the Church, in employing water, bread and wine, "the common things in daily use", give expression to "the concentrated essence of the sacramental life". This is an important concept in Oman's thinking about the sacraments. The particularity of the Church's sacraments functions centrifugally, illuminating the sacramental meaning of the whole, i.e. the whole of life. Oman continues:

> They presuppose that there is more in nature than an appeal to the senses, more in the gift of food than to eat of the loaves and be filled, and that we ought therein to see the miracle of a gracious God manifesting Himself in goodness.[147]

Inherent in sacramental sensibility is the awareness that the world cannot be encompassed within a purely materialist paradigm; that life is a gift from God and that grace is ministered to us though the whole range of human experience. Such awareness can be neither explained, nor contradicted, by a strict naturalism; it is the fruit of "a general feeling towards things, an attitude of soul".[148]

The particularity of the Lord's Supper, however, conveys something beyond general awareness of the divine; it is a sacrament of reconciliation. In other words, it is

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[144] *Faith and Freedom*, 271.

[145] John Macquarrie makes a similar point about the fundamental duality of the term "psychosomatic". He writes: We cannot pretend that we are spiritual beings for that would make us angels (or possibly demons!), and we cannot pretend (though sometimes we try) to live as animals. John Macquarrie, *A Guide to Sacraments* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 2.

[146] WT/1/17c Page 65.

[147] *Grace and Personality*,177.

[148] *Dialogue with God*, 153 The expression is taken from another context, but it is germane to the point being discussed.

symbolic of an end to human alienation from God and the acceptance of God in all of life. Christ exemplifies this reconciliation, accepting life as a gift, not just when he contemplated the beauty of the lilies in the field, but even in the experience of the Cross. It is the Cross that makes the totality of experience the sacrament of God. Oman writes:

> The special rite which connects this sacrament of life [bread and wine] directly with the Cross forbids us to rule out any part of experience, and teaches us to find in agony shame and death the manifold wisdom and measureless love of God.[149]

For Oman, the Lord's Supper is "pre-eminently the sacrament of reconciliation".[150] But again, its power is centrifugal. From the centre point of God's reconciling love in the Cross is birthed the revelation that:

> …the whole world is God's temple, wherein our common life and all our dealings with our brethren, amid all the wickedness of man and even the fears and agonies and corruption of death, are ministers of God for the deliverance of His children.[151]

There is nothing, therefore, that in some way does not serve God's love; there are no distinct realms of the secular and sacred; "the world is our spiritual possession".[152]

This is a powerful and suggestive orientation of the sacramental theology. It escapes the legal interpretations of the atonement that Oman found morally objectionable; it links the sacrament of the world to the deeper sacrament of the Cross; and now the pain of the world, as well as the beauty of the world, is seen in the light of God's sovereign love. It is a sacramental theology that speaks peace to the soul, not just because sin is taken up into God's heart on the Cross and forgiven, but because the

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[149] *Grace and Personality*, 177-178.

[150] *Grace and Personality*, 178.

[151] *Grace and Personality*, 230.

[152] *Grace and Personality*,178. Macquarrie quotes John A. T. Robinson who when stricken with cancer at the height of his powers commented: "It is easy to see God in the sunset but very hard to see God in cancer" *Sacraments*, 10. Oman would agree with Macquarrie that Robinson's comment points to a "sticking point" when speaking about the goodness of God. Macquarrie's "solution" is like Oman's: he appeals to the Cross as the place of reconciliation to God in the bleakest experience. "Christ is not only the healer but the sufferer whose very cross has become the symbol of salvation." Macquarrie, however, connects the reconciling power of the cross to the sacrament of unction. Op cite, 42-42, 157-167.

natural pain of creation, suffering in animals, the suffering of the elderly, the children in the cancer ward, the millions of starving, the mercilessness of natural disaster, can all be left, to use the old language of piety, at the foot of the Cross. The peace of the Cross is a peace deeper than human brokenness; it is a peace that bridges the gulf between God and creation. The Cross is the sacrament, the symbol, of an ontological bond that, though fractured, cannot be severed; indeed, in the love of God in Christ that bond is healed and restored. The Cross reveals a loving God that endures failure and hopes eternally. In the world of time and space, the Cross is the final reality.

There are several practical aspects to this sacramental theology. First of all, Oman is comfortable with the various names by which the Lord's Supper is recognised. Before it was a religious rite, the holy supper was an *Agape*, a fellowship meal. It was abuse and misrepresentation that caused the practice to be dropped in the early Church.[153] Secondly, the term *Eucharist* was for Oman a term that has been sadly neglected; one presumes he is referring to neglected usage within Reformed practice. Eucharistic language encapsulates two necessary elements: those of thanksgiving and victory. He remarks:

> Originally the idea is thanksgiving for victory. We have too much neglected this notion. [The sacrament] is not a mere recollection of suffering, but of victory over the world and the worst that it contains.[154]

Thirdly, and most importantly for Oman, communion takes on meaning only in the context of *koinonia.* "Communion is fellowship in Christ's spirit manifest in His people."[155] He is strongly critical of the idea of communion as a special channel of grace to the individual; and, also of the idea that it is a religious rite administered at the prerogative of clergy. Communion with Christ becomes real in the fellowship of love and forgiveness shared in the Christian community. In his lectures to his students he warns and questions:

> The Church is not an organisation, not a horde of individuals, but a *koinonia.* The great question is: Is the Church an organisation of a

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[153] WT/1/17c Page 70.

[154] WT/1/17c Page 70.

[155] WT/1/ 17c Page 70.

> fellowship there with common purpose? The answer to this will decide the nature of the sacraments.[156]

Oman is in no doubt as to his answer. The common purpose of the Christian community is to live in the spirit of a family; this is its best witness to the world and its deepest experience of Christ. The Church is a family where human failings are borne with patient love; it is a fellowship that encourages the struggling and despairing; and it is a community that praises God for the hope of final victory in all things. Christ is manifest in this *koinonia.*

It is interesting that Oman's theology of the sacraments is closely allied to his ecclesiology. His emphasis on *koinonia* complements his aversion to the Church as structure and institution. The sharing of bread and wine as an expression of communion with Christ in and through the fellowship of believers was, he believed, fundamental to the Church from earliest times. He comments:

> The meaning of the rite is a participation in a way of suffering by which we triumph and enter the Kingdom: it must be understood in the light of the apocalyptic hope of early Christianity.[157]

Nor was fellowship intended to be exclusive; but, rather, emblematic of the wider family of humanity, of which the Church, as a people reconciled to God, is prophetic. Quoting St Paul, Oman says, "Christ is the head of everyman – not the head of the Church…".[158] In his focus on communion as *koinonia*, Oman provides a helpful nuance to his emphasis on faith as personal. Faith always remains personal, but not apart from, nor in conflict with, the inter-personal. From that point of view, the sacrament of admission, the sacrament of baptism, is symbolic of the Church as a personal and corporate reality. The sacrament of baptism is symbolic of "its first condition, a change of heart".[159]

Had Oman been a systematic thinker, his theology of the sacraments would have been second only in importance to his theology of grace and personality. His

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[156] WT/1/17c Page 64.

[157] WT/1/17c Page 65.

[158] WT/1/17c Page 70.

[159] *Vision and Authority*, 310

thinking with regard to sacraments is creative in its linking of nature, the Cross and community. It is a pity the reader has to search for through scattered references in order to build up a picture. However, the criticism made by Helen Oppenheimer,[160] that Oman's theology of grace is too exclusively relational, still stands. She posited that sometimes we hunger for grace *in* us. Oman's concentration on the experience of Christ, in and through community, does not quite meet the need; but, it does give a convincing theology of Christ *with* us. The thrust of Oman's theology is so entirely outwards, from institutions, from sanctified formulae, from special channels of grace, that he might well respond: breathe the air around, seek not an oxygen mask from heaven, taste the water of life, do not bottle the Father's goodness. In these imagined replies, we see the potential of Oman's theology of the sacraments not only to direct the eyes of the Church out beyond its boundaries, but to raise self-interrogating questions. How does the soul experience Christ? What is the nature of Christian fellowship? Can the "born again" experience be something more than a personal piety? Can sacramental practice be more than nurture for the individual soul? Oman's theology of the sacraments sets all these questions in the context of *koinonia*. Regardless of what one might think of the particulars, the broad conclusion would appear to be sound.

Summary

This examination of the practicalities of Oman's ecclesiology reveals him to be both tolerant of institutions and revisionist. All ecclesiastical traditions may act as vehicles for the transcendent; but, in Oman's view, the non-conformist traditions offer the largest scope for personal freedom. Within non-conformist ecclesiology, Oman would seem keen to erase clergy-lay distinctions, with the possibility of lay administration of the sacraments. The primary role of the minister is preacher and teacher and that specialism should be maintained at the highest quality possible. It would have been interesting had Oman written more specifically about the meaning of ordination. His views are hinted at rather than explained; but the revisionist tendency of his thinking is obvious.

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[160] See Chapter Two, 2.2.1

Oman's theology of the sacraments is the most creative of his specifics. The linking of nature, the Cross and communion sets the sacraments in a holistic context. More particularly, Oman's focus on *koinonia* integrates sacramental presence and fellowship in a way that transcends individualism as well as sacramental exclusivity. Had Oman given it more systematic presentation, it would have been a theological gift of importance. Overall, Oman's treatment of institutions, ministry, people and sacraments reveals a side of his thinking that is otherwise lost. His theology of practice was rooted, tolerant and creative in its suggestions.

Appraisal

This chapter has sought to unearth the foundation principles of Oman's ecclesiology. It has been argued that apocalyptic sensibility and a spiritual concept of evolution shape Oman's theology of the Church. These ideas co-here with his core values of grace and personality and complement his metaphysic of the natural and the supernatural. From these varied angles, Oman offers a theology of the Church that takes its meaning not from history but from the transcendent, from what Oman calls the "everlasting order of love in freedom and freedom in love".[161] The Church exists between the ideal and the empirical; in proverbial language, it is in the world but not of it. As the Cross of Christ is a prolepsis of the ultimate reconciliation of the world to God, so the Church is a community of the reconciled in waiting. It is one of the peculiarities of Oman's ecclesiology that he arrives at a concept of the Church consistent with the New Testament via an idealistic rather than an historical route. Perhaps that should not surprise the reader, given the idealistic presuppositions of the New Testament itself.

Secondly, though Oman's ecclesiology approximates to the New Testament vision of the community of Christ, it is not easy to classify in terms of traditional models of the Church. A methodology of "a truly empirical inquiry" that "works with all experience possible for us to have"[162] has the effect of knocking many *a priori* theologies of the Church off their pedestals. The historical starting points that mark

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[161] *Vision and Authority*, 340.

[162] *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 117.

most ecclesiology - Roman Catholic, Lutheran or Reformed - are not ignored but merged with broader religious and philosophical presuppositions. Oman's ecclesiology, accordingly, is somewhat exotic in a modern ecumenical perspective. Take, for example, an evangelical work on ecclesiology like that of Vel-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*[163] – it is difficult to find an appropriate slot for Oman's particular vision. The nearest to Oman's point of view in the various essays is that entitled "The Church as Fellowship: Free Church Ecclesiologies".[164] Oman does stand in the radical Reformation tradition of the priesthood of all believers, unmediated access to God and the Church as primarily a fellowship. However, such comparisons disguise as much as they reveal. Oman's foundational principles of apocalyptic sensibility, evolutionary spirituality and personal realism take the reader into strange territory that the biblical radicals of the Reformation would not have dreamt of. Oman's ecclesiology, of course, has affinity with the spiritual radicals of the Reformation who prized the Spirit over text. Oman belongs in this radical continuum, acknowledging the entirety of experience as the sphere of divine revelation and fellowship.

Thirdly, the continuity between Oman's ecclesiology and his Christology is substantive. In Pauline language, for Oman, the Church is "hid with Christ in God".[165] As noted in the previous chapter, Christ embodies the freedom at the heart of a universe that is evolving into the loving purpose of God. In Christ there is a unique combination of freedom and utter devotion to God that makes him a revelation of the divine in humanity. Expressed in Oman's primary categories, it is "in Christ" that the natural to the supernatural are reconciled and the philosophical

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[163] Vel-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2002).

[164] *Ecclesiology*, 59-67 In the Edwardian context, Oman acknowledged similarities with the work of Walter Hobhouse. *Divine Order*, Preface viii. Hobhouse, Canon of Birmingham Cathedral, gave a series of lectures at Oxford University in 1909 on the Church and its future. Hobhouse's cardinal principles are the same as Oman's: "God respects human freedom both in the sphere of moral action and in the sphere of spiritual belief" and "God uses human instruments for His revelation and spiritual guidance of man", Walter Hobhouse, *The Church and the World in Idea and in History* (London: Macmillan & Co; 1910)13-14. Even the title is emblematic of a shared spiritual outlook. However, Oman puts much more weight on "idea" than upon history.

[165] Colossians 3:3 (AV).

divide between empiricism and idealism is bridged. The Church is wherever this ontology of reconciliation is realised afresh. In that sense, the Church is truly fellowship with the crucified and risen Christ, but within a larger, theistic narrative than most Christ-centred doctrines of the Church allow. Christ belongs to, clarifies and completes a narrative that is as old as humanity. The Church too is as old as humanity, as a community expressive of freedom and love, to whatever degree. However, in the light of Christ's revelation, the Church is wherever the two or the three meet in the fellowship of his love and are obedient to his heavenly vision.

Fourthly, there is a real sense in which Oman's ecclesiology represents a creative return to the New Testament. The dominant themes are the apocalyptic vision of Jesus, the priority of the Kingdom of God and love as a principle of fellowship. Like the true revolutionary, Oman endeavours to return to origins, to purity of vision and to seminal inspiration. His reaching back over generations of tradition to the primal vision of Jesus will leave the historical sensibility frustrated. Most theology is a re-visiting and a re-working of tradition. In contrast, Oman's approach was essentially visionary, linking the primal vision of Jesus to his deepest convictions about reality. Such a perspective, of course, demands great faith in the *present reality of God*. Like the pool at Bethsaida, history affords only moments of such vision – as in the Reformation and its prodigy, the Enlightenment – and even then the absence of needful alertness may miss the opportunity afforded. As Oman comments in his lectures to students:

> Apocalyptic is not the slow moralisation of the race but that which comes with great disaster. The very material success of a civilization may end in its spiritual disaster. The supreme thing in the end is what we worship, the faith by which we live, the love by which we cherish. [Break] But in history, the higher in a civilization never emancipates itself from the lower except through catastrophe.[166]

Oman's theology of the Church reaches beyond institutions and is at once a return to the historic centre and to a prophetic of dawning reality.

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[166] WT/1/84.

Fifthly, it is obvious that Oman's ecclesiology will not satisfy a traditionalist sensibility. For example, in the eyes of many, the wisdom inherent in tradition, creed and office is too precious and too necessary for Christian identity to be sacrificed to subjective vision. Ignorance of tradition and the absence of historical perspective account for the plethora of denominations and the self-serving spiritualities that characterise modern Protestantism. Oman would be unimpressed with the phenomena of mega churches and spiritual fantasy; he would, surely, identify with the traditionalist critique. Indeed, to the shallowness of much of Protestantism in the twenty-first century, Oman's remarks about Jansenism are apposite. The Jansenists, Pascal included, combined institutional reverence *with* the freedom of the soul before God. That combination, and the need that called for it, is, Oman wrote in his Kerr lectures, "always tending to occur"; and, he continues: "it some day may be of vital importance to the Christian Church".[167] This conservative view is a minor key in Oman's ecclesiology which, like everything else, is contextually determined. One can only speculate, but it may be a word that Oman would utter to the Church of today. In ecclesiology, as in all else, Oman's thinking can take either a radical or a conservative turn; it is inspirational rather than directive and leaves the reader with the freedom and responsibility to make up his, or her, mind. Thus, on the one hand, liberal sensibility will find in Oman's work a theology of the Church consistent with an evolutionary world view, predicated upon a new world order and confident of the Kingdom already present in hearts that love the Lord. Divine presence heralds the sanctification of the world and the coming new heavens and new earth. But, on the other hand, there is too the voice of realism, saying that institutional religion may in certain circumstances be the guardian of freedom. These major and minor chords in Oman's ecclesiology make it worthy of serious study in an age of secularism and religious fundamentalism.

In sum, personal freedom is the ground of Oman's ecclesiology but it is always freedom under, or with, God. With respect to his own ecclesiology, his drawing of diverse themes into one coherent whole, his eclectic use of sources, his dialectical relation to the thinking of others and individuality of his presentation, illustrate a

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[167] *Faith and Freedom*, 63.

mind for which freedom is a cardinal value. Of course, freedom was not only something exhibited in the creativity of his own writing; freedom was a fundamental premise of his metaphysics. Ideas exist against a horizon of freedom. The uniqueness of Christ is in the way he embodied freedom and introduced his followers to it. In the horizon of freedom, knowledge claims new territory, faith does new things, love bears with failure and death holds no terror. The Church embodies all these things, and more, for it knows the freedom of a new order to come, the freedom wherewith Christ has made it free.

Chapter Seven

Conclusions

1 Contexts: a summary

F. R. Tennant in his review of *The Natural and the Supernatural* commented that it is "a work inspired by experience and outlook of pronounced individuality".[168] This judgement may be applied to Oman's work as a whole. The benefit of this study has been that it has unearthed the contextual richness of Oman's work and has revealed the "pronounced individuality" that Tennant commended. Oman's knowledge of European intellectual traditions was extensive. This is remarkable in one who had no formal education in Orkney.[169] But, with acquisition of a high level of literacy in German, Oman was able to access and engage with the wide sweep of European philosophy and theology. Though Oman may have been impatient about providing footnotes and bibliography, the European dimensions of his thinking are clear. In the past, not enough attention has been given to this important facet of his work. Oman is usually credited as being a liberal Protestant thinker in the tradition of Schleiermacher. However, his concept of person, with its strong emphasis on moral autonomy, owes a great deal to Kant. As well as having knowledge of the work of major historical figures, Oman was familiar with the contemporary scholarship in church history, biblical studies and theology. This is demonstrated in his critical awareness of the work, for example, of now largely forgotten figures such as Sohm, Loofs and Baldensperger. Though Oman's relation to European thought has been highlighted in this contextual study, his relation to European thought is far from exhausted. It is an area of Oman scholarship that merits further research.

Whilst the influence of European thought is acknowledged by Oman and by his reviewers, recognition of the Scottish dimension to his work has been marginal. The

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[168] F. R. Tennant, Book Review of *The Natural and the Supernatural* by John Oman, *Mind*, 41 (April 1932), 212.

[169] Oman's early earliest education in Orkney was provided by a tutor employed by a neighbour for his family, *Doctrine of God*, 7. Also, Healey records the comment of the tutor when he heard that Oman's parents were sending him to Edinburgh, that he "saw no promise to justify the effort". *Religion and Reality*, 158.

exception has been Stephen Bevans' helpful biographical details about Oman's early life in Orkney. This thesis has expanded upon Bevans' work, identifying Oman's early life experiences as holding the key to his core values. The first influence was that of Oman's roots in Orkney and the spiritual environment of the United Presbyterian Church. The genesis of Oman's love of personal freedom may be traced to early formative impressions. Factors were at work in Oman's life, before and after the Robertson Smith trial, that contributed to his settled conviction with regard to freedom as the essential spiritual value. Oman's life in Orkney and his education in Edinburgh were accumulative in their effects, elevating freedom to a position of practical and existential importance. For example, the existence of denominations was illustrative of ecclesiastical liberty going back to the Reformation. Orkney itself was a microcosm of Scotland, with three strands of Presbyterianism. At a human level, Oman seems to have had a particularly tolerant up-bringing, where difference was respected and where the idiosyncrasies of personality enriched community life. In Orkney also, Oman's experience of the numinous set personal experience above creed and orthodoxy and Oman's Church, the United Presbyterian, nurtured liberty of opinion. For example, more than any other branch of Presbyterianism, the tradition of the Seceders sought to relieve ministers and elders of those aspects of confessional subscription that were injurious to conscience. Thus, the United Presbyterian Church was first to introduce a Declaratory Act in 1879. The formidable figure of John Cairns, whose irenic and catholic spirit directed the Declaratory Act through the General Assembly, proved to be an abiding influence on Oman. Cairns, though more committed to confessional standards than Oman would ever be, impressed upon Oman the priority of character over creed and doctrine. At least, this was the aspect of Cairns life that Oman chose to highlight: Cairns exemplified grace and personality.

Over and above Church influence, the impact of Oman's education in philosophy in Edinburgh must be taken into account when tracing the roots of Oman's emphasis on personal freedom. When Oman began studying, all his philosophy teachers were emphasising freedom as an important element in metaphysics. Henry Calderwood stressed the centrality of personality as self-directing, self-legislating and self-conscious; Campbell Fraser articulated spiritual realism through his study of

Berkley; and Andrew Seth Pringle Pattison was the pioneer of personal idealism. Oman could not have failed to be challenged and stimulated by this philosophical climate. After the First World War, the emphasis on personality, freedom and responsibility was especially strong amongst Oman's contemporaries, for example, William Ritchie Sorley and Andrew Seth Pringle Pattison. It is not co-incidental that both Sorley and Pringle Pattison lost sons as casualties in the war. Oman's particular contribution to the intellectual ferment and moral heart-searching that accompanied the sacrifice of a whole generation was to think theologically about the issues that concerned others philosophically. His seminal work, *Grace and Personality*, was a labour of creativity aimed at bringing theology into harmony with the highest insights of philosophy and philosophy into harmony with a spiritual anthropology. Thus, the fundamental principle of personal freedom was to change Oman's understanding of grace, from being an instrument of omnipotence to being a relationship of nurture. The groundwork for the personalist theology that emerged in *Grace and Personality*, and which was extended and developed in Oman's subsequent work, could hardly have come about from merely sitting in Robertson Smith's heresy trial. Whilst not wishing to under estimate the emotional impact of the trial, Oman's philosophical study gave him critical tools which he used to great effect; he challenged all systems of thought that threatened personal freedom and its correlate responsibility.

2 Personal freedom: a unifying principle

If, in Oman's cultural contexts, one finds the seeds of personal freedom, it is in his work that one finds a highly individual flowering of the same. Oman is difficult to categorise as a theologian precisely because of the way his mind ranged freely across philosophical and theological boundaries. The result is scholarship that is *à la carte* with the imperative of personal choice. Oman's work exemplifies his philosophy of personal freedom: the freedom of persons to form judgements, to make decisions and to mark the boundary between self and totalising systems. Oman draws from diverse and often conflicting perspectives and weaves them into a coherent narrative. This is the glory and the frustration of his work; he is never amenable to classification and always nuanced in his appreciation and in his criticism. Though a professor of

systematic theology and though he recognised the need for systematic thinking for the sake of clarity, systems were, for Oman, a veil over the complexity of reality.

However, freedom is more than a personal methodology in Oman's work. Freedom is the method a God of love uses to bring an otherwise unintelligible and disparate universe to final unity. It is in the freedom of personality that, for Oman, the essential clue to the meaning of the universe is found. The freedom of persons is a mirror of the ontological freedom at the heart of all things. This conviction is at the root of Oman's criticism of philosophies of the Absolute that would make personality adjectival, rather than substantial and constitutive of reality. To be a human being, Oman ever insisted, is to be conscious of a spiritual freedom that relates self to ontological totality However, such freedom is a work in progress, embryonic, evolving and in need of nurture. In this, Oman was both the heir to Kant and a critic. Oman could not accept Kant's bifurcation of reality into the ideal realm of freedom and the empirical realm of necessity. Oman's ontology was holistic and interactive. God is not a mere moral legislator but an educator, a nurturer of persons, the encourager of loving relationships, as well as being the transcendent ground of all good. Divine love works with infinite patience to win human hearts, minds and wills. This, Oman argues, is the truth of Schleiermacher's emphasis on feeling, Hegel's on mind and Kant's on will.

At some point early in his career – he gave the Kerr Lectures in 1906 –Oman came to see freedom as the ultimate spiritual value. It was a visionary moment: it determined his understanding of evolution, his metaphysics, his reading of history, his revision of the reformed theology his narrative method and the entire panoply of his thought. The complexity of ideas and the coherence of Oman's thinking were alike the fruit of the final and ultimate importance he ascribed to personal freedom in a personal universe.

3 Consequences: a reductionist, an apologist of a visionary?

Alan P. Sell tells an anecdote about a visitor to Cambridge knocking on Oman's door. When Oman answered, the visitor said to himself: Is this the face of a

fisherman, the face of a scholar or the face of a saint?[170] When the reader has finished reading Oman's books, he or she might well ask: is this the work of a reductionist, a Christian apologist or a spiritual visionary? The answer will to a large measure depend on the criteria brought to the study. For some, like the questioner at the Auburn Seminary, Oman will appear to have pruned the Christian tradition so drastically that the faith once delivered to the saints is a mere rump. To others, Oman will have cleared away the dead wood of tradition so that the essential core of faith is again discernable. And, to another reader, Oman may well appear as a visionary whose work was prophetic of the way ahead for a post-Christendom era. In this section these three reactions are examined.

3.1 A reductionist

The charge of reductionism was most often made by Oman's reviewers with respect to his ecclesiology. Knox and others felt that Oman had marginalised the importance of institutional frameworks for a vibrant faith. Healy, on the other hand, defends Oman, arguing that the non-institutional thrust of Oman's work must not be exaggerated. This thesis has argued that a distinction must be made between pastoral concern and religious vision. Oman would not have wished to take away from any believing soul the comfort of creed and institution. But, together with pastoral empathy Oman held a vision of a new dispensation where Christian faith and fellowship would live and prosper without institutional props. In *Faith and Freedom* he wrote: "every living institution ought to be attempting to abolish itself; every statutory arrangement should be anticipating a higher than legal obedience; every appointment by men for others should contemplate itself as a discipline for teaching men to recognise no appointment but their own".[171] It is a bold vision of non-institutionalised freedom and fellowship in the love of God. But, as has been argued in chapter six, Oman recognised the necessity of the institutional Church in the interim. If humanity could handle the fullness of freedom, God would grant it immediately; but, given human spiritual capacity, it would be more of a burden than

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[170] A remark made at the Oman Conference at Westminster College, Cambridge, 2009.

[171] *Faith and Freedom*, 417.

a blessing. "Therefore", he writes, God "appoints a statutory element in life and religion to be a substitute for freedom when men are weary of it and a discipline when they misuse it. It is legitimate though only as a resting place".[172] Oman's reductionism of the Church, therefore, is real but qualified; the realisation of the ideal Church in time and space is contingent upon humanity coming of age. In an evolved spiritual maturity, humanity would be able to live in harmony with love and in the enjoyment of freedom; but that is an apocalyptic hope. Meantime institutional Christianity is a comfort to the soul for whom God–apart from the tangible reality of pulpit, altar and pew – may seem a distant dream.

Oman's valuation of the institutional Church as provisional will not reassure those who believe the Church is God's chosen instrument of grace. Oman's apocalyptic vision marginalises the historical, whether in the Catholic sense of the Church as a divine institution, or in the Protestant perspective of the Church as the normal vehicle of salvation.[173] Grant observes that, for Oman, "the Church is the only organisation where its ideal is its essence".[174] Thus, Oman's theology is always shedding the historical forms of yesterday. It is always reforming. His ecclesiology cannot escape the charge of historical reductionism, though it is so for the highest motives. The empirical Church can only ever be an approximation to the ideal and should never seek to supplant it. In Oman's ecclesiology the unique calling, and special mission, of the Church is to be a prophetic witness: to be in the forefront of not just proclaiming a new divine order, but of realising that new reality in practical fellowship. The Church, as an institution, will always be needed, especially when humanity uses freedom destructively, perhaps even to the point of apocalyptic disaster. Like the symbolism of the church steeple, earthly reminders are needed of heavenly reality. The Church is always provisional; and it is necessary through being provisional.

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[172] *Faith and Freedom*,418.

[173] The Westminster Confession of Faith affirms that outside "the visible church [Break] there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter xxv, Section ii.

[174] *Collected Works*, 340.

Oman's radical relegation of the historical Church is one element in a larger theological revisionism. Oman relegates the Bible and historic creeds to the authority of experience; and, the magisterial place he gives to experience over the Christ of the creeds may be considered a marked departure from Christian tradition. It is a departure born of Oman's willingness to sacrifice historical authority for the gain of freedom. Until the critic finds a better solution to the question of the relation between freedom and historically conditioned authority, Oman's vision remains a durable and creative hypothesis. If faith is to be reconciled with freedom and freedom with faith, a transcendent perspective is required; Oman finds that perspective in the divine love that is parent to both faith and freedom and which shows no favouritism to either of her children.

In relation, specifically, to Christology Oman's reductionism is not simply a subordination of the historical to the ideal, but an elevation of the personal and practical. The importance of Christ for faith is not what can be said of him dogmatically, but what is experienced of God through his inspiration. "Christ is the supreme revelation only as he is the supreme reconciliation."[175] A charge may be made that Oman has reduced revelation in Christ to "method". Christ is the revelation of the method whereby God can be known at all times and in all places. It is the disciple who appropriates the faith, freedom and love demonstrated by Christ that perceives his uniqueness and finality. Oman sums up this Christology of *praxis* as follows:

> Its finality is not as a body of truth which makes of no account God's patient wisdom in overcoming unbelief, manifested in all human history, but as the embodiment of a relation to the father, the perfection of which we prove only as we use it to interpret His relation to us in all things and at all times.[176]

Oman's existential Christology will be unsatisfying to the critic who places primary value on the divine origin and status of Christ, as the precondition of his redeeming work. Oman's primary emphasis on personal experience leads to a tectonic shift from the person of Christ to his work. Christ's being is predicated on his doing.

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[175] *Grace and Personality*, 166.

[176] *Grace and Personality*, 166.

Reconciliation becomes foundational and with it Oman's theology of the Cross. There is, in the classical sense, an ontological deficit in Oman's Christology. However, one could argue that ontological deficit is compensated for by Oman's concentration on the Cross as an icon and symbol. The ontological dimension is dispersed and is present in cosmic disclosure and spiritual anthropology. Christ is the template for anthropological homecoming to God and for the teleological fulfilment of creation in God. Ontology is disclosed in the human and cosmic dynamic of divine love. Love bears the burden of estrangement and alienation, it is the ontological alpha and omega of creation, it reveals to the human heart the way of reconciliation and redemption. Method may sound an inadequate word to describe the glory that was in Christ. However, if the Cross is the disclosure of the divine method whereby God loves his enemies, is kind to the evil and unthankful, and gives creation a future beyond entropy: can there be any greater epiphany or revelation of the glory of God?

3.2 A radical apologist

The foregoing criticisms of Oman as reductionist of the fullness of historical Christianity invite a fuller appreciation of his own apologia for Christian faith. Whilst Oman had no interest in defending Christianity lock, stock and barrel he was keen to set forth the core of Christian faith which for him was the love of God attested by Christ. What Oman means by love is always synonymous with the unveiling of love in the Cross.[177] The love of the Cross is multifaceted: comforting, patient, long-suffering and victorious. The Cross reveals that "God's will is love and his goal is freedom".[178] Consequently, Oman offers the reader, therefore, a theology that is stripped of some of the worst accretions of history. There is no violence in God, no coercion, no holiness at variance with love, but rather a holiness which is the fire of his love. The traditional attributes of God's omniscience and omnipotence are transfigured in the light of the Cross; there is no power or dominion apart from suffering love. But, love suffers only as a means to an end; its task is ultimately to

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[177] See Chapter Five, also Bevans, *Doctrine of God*, 82-91.

[178] *Vision and Authority*, 347.

remove suffering but "there is no easier way" by which the "dominion of love could be perfected".[179]

The ontological depth of love disclosed at the Cross, bridging the natural and the supernatural, carries forward in the stream of time in the experience of reconciliation. Here, too, the apologetic power of Oman's theology deserves attention. Oman's is a theology for the public arena. Chapter five noted how Oman refused to divorce justification from sanctification and insisted that both are integrated in the experience of reconciliation; and, whilst at the individual level the pastoral implications of linking free grace to reconciliation needs special discernment, in the public sphere the balance between grace and truth is essential to the dynamic of liberation. In situations where the poor are marginalised and forgotten, in areas where racism poisons community relations, or in post-conflict situations like Northern Ireland where forgiveness on its own is a ghost-like reality, from another world but with no flesh and blood, then the holistic concept of reconciliation is indispensible to Christian witness. In holding together moral reality and the grace of forgiveness Oman earths the gospel. Oman's insistence on penitence as the *sine qua non* of justification provides solid ground on which to build enduring, as opposed to ephemeral, peace, better relationships and a shared future. In the public arena, Oman's doctrine of reconciliation is not a sticking patch on the running sores of history, but a call to earnestness and action in the horizon of God's universal love. Oman's vision of reconciliation calls attention to how the Kingdom of God may be realised in the broken kingdoms of the world. It is a hard road but the only road; Oman is no apologist for smooth things.[180]

Ecology too may learn from Oman's theology of the material and the spiritual. Spirituality divorced from the material can easily become pious and self-righteous and materialism divorced from spiritual vision has no direction and no end to serve

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[179] *Vision and Authority*, 343.

[180] Oman's concentration on reconciliation may be compared to the Protestant scholastic theme of adoption. See, Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter xii. John Macpherson comments: "The grace of adoption is the immediate result of justification, and the spirit of adoption is the real germ of sanctification". *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, with introduction and notes by Rev John Macpherson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1882), 94.

other than more of the same. Oman would regard the contemporary reverential attitude given to market forces as an idolatry of the most damning kind and denial of "man's chief end".[181] A renewed sense of the holy and the sacred – as a means to right use of the earth as a gift to be shared – would, for Oman, be the only thing that can save the planet from the corrosive effects of materialism. Divine love has the power to make all things new, beginning with the human heart, but not stopping there; the sanctification of humanity is the first fruit of new creation; in the Pauline sense, the whole created order waits for the sons and daughters of God to be revealed.[182] Oman's theology of love meets the needs of the soul, but those needs are inseparable from the promise love holds for creation.

Oman extols the gospel of love in all its creative power and wide reaches. His work exhibits the mind of a radical apologist; his cutting and pruning is not the work of someone who wishes to diminish Christianity; it is the effort of a thinker who wishes to press towards the Christian tradition's centre and core. Again, it must be acknowledged that Oman subjects historical tradition to the cut of his own particular pruning tools. The transcendence of love, its mediation through human beings, the memory and inspiration of Christ, the freedom to which we are called through grace – these operate within the ontology of the ideal and the real, of love and reality. Christian faith comes alive in the freedom of persons and presages the freedom of the whole creation.

3.3 A Visionary

Oman's work may be regarded as visionary on two fronts: with respect to the question that preoccupied him all his life – the question of authority in the Church – and the question of secularisation.

Oman's central theme of the authority of experience one could argue has been begrudgingly accepted by the Church, but more as a necessity than a virtue. It is an aspect of his work that merits being better known in the Church at large; because it

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[181] *Shorter Catechism*, Question One: What is man's chief end? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

[182] Romans 8: 18-27.

brings clarity to the issue of authority, a subject often the source of conflict and confusion. For Oman, final authority rests with the voice of God spoken through experience to the whole person: to feeling, mind, and conscience. In itself this is not all that radical; it makes explicit what in liberal Protestantism is implicit. In fact, all traditions have been continually modified in the light of experience. Christianity is not a religion of the book, in the absolute sense of Islam. In two millennia Churches have changed their teaching on subjects as diverse as usury, slavery, the death penalty, cremation, birth control and divorce, never mind wearing hats in Church! The Church has *affirmed* tradition and *acted* in the light of experience. It is a *via media* that shapes, particularly, the ethos of liberal Christianity and makes it a spacious spiritual place for enquiry, for personal conviction, for fellowship without uniformity. And, yet, the very spaciousness of liberalism is often the source of misunderstanding both from without and within. Those outside Churches often credit believers with more faith in their foundation documents than they really have; and conservative Christians take the affirmation of authority for the Bible and the creeds at face value. The result is a history of internal dispute and external bemusement. The most negative effect is the energy expended on internal disputes between liberals and conservatives over what the Bible teaches. Oman's vision of experience as the ultimate sphere of revelation is, on the other hand, a dynamic, progressive model of faith. It is a model that does not deny the importance of tradition as an element *within* experience; however, it is the existential word spoken at the heart of personal and social reality that is magisterial. In Oman's vocabulary, faith is never static but prophetic, a principle that finds expression in the Bible itself. Oman's vision, in effect, regularises what has been the *practice* within liberal Protestantism since the end of heresy trials. Undoubtedly, Oman's principle of experiential authority would be too radical for many to embrace; and, yet, it has been embraced by degrees. The Church may not be ready for Oman's vision; perhaps by definition, vision is that for which no one is ready. Meantime, the Church does not sound a trumpet that is clear. Liberal Christians decide issues on the basis of the most up-to-date knowledge; for example, none would argue that the Genesis creation myth provides an accurate scientific explanation of the origins of the universe. Nor do liberal Christians believe that the Bible gives timeless, non-culturally conditioned teaching with respect to

human sexuality. And yet, to justify liberal attitudes before the bar of theological conservatism an amazing amount of time and effort is spent in the quest to find scriptural authority for what, in practice, experience has already decided. Modern knowledge is as self-authenticating with respect to human sexuality as it is with respect to the age of the universe. Reversion to Occam's razor can only muddy the water and give an impression of bibliolatry. Oman's vision of respect for the authority of the past in the light of the greater authority of the present is a vision that the Church may one day explicitly acknowledge; the Church may yet preach what she practises.[183]

Oman's work, if better known, may well speak to secular society also. Oman offers a spiritual view of the universe which – without denying the natural world – affirms an ultimate immaterial reality, or Mind. It is a philosophy that, when voiced today, comes after a long metaphysical silence. Idealism was eclipsed by analytical empiricism in the mid-twentieth century and philosophy moved from providing theories of meaning to analysis of language. Oman's spiritual empiricism, predicated on values as well as facts, will speak to anyone who finds a purely analytical method and materialist ontology unsatisfying. Oman's religious philosophy, therefore, may speak to modernity for the following reasons. First, in Oman's work the canons of the Enlightenment are accepted. For example, all facts, values and knowledge may be questioned and individual autonomy is not subject to any authority save that of reality's witness to itself. There is no substitute, that is, for sincere engagement with life. "The help of others is essential", wrote Oman, but "the authority of others is stagnation."[184] But, secondly, Oman's acceptance of the Romantic emphasis on individuality places an important caveat on rational triumphalism. People reason not in the abstract but in the light of experience: political, cultural, social, religious and

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[183] Adam Hood argues the point that Christian history itself supports a "progressive model of revelation". The ordination of women, for example, is an example of the Church "discerning a new message", *Baillie, Oman and Macmurray*, 197. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* in allowing for matters "to be ordered by light of nature and Christian prudence…..according to the *general rules* of the word" (italics mine) has a place for the authority of experience. The United Presbyterian Declaratory Act of 1879 may be considered as recognition of this point.

[184] *Vision and Authority*, 46.

personal.[185] Oman's theology of personal freedom, therefore, is contextual or environmentally conditioned; there is no coercive uniformity in his concept of personality. The recognition, by Oman, of the spiritual evolution of personality saves his theology from being imperialist, or elitist; it is grounded on the infinite patience of love. Oman's example of "the woman old and poor, in the threadbare gown and old fashioned bonnet", as the one who exhibits "the beauty of holiness" and "gentleness of Christ", illustrates his sensitivity to individuality, and not just an abstract concept of the individual. Thirdly, Oman's is a voice that speaks not from above but from along side, and there is a democratic quality about this theological vision. If, as Oman argues, knowledge of God is finally dependent upon recognition of the image of Christ in one's neighbour, there can be no self-centred spirituality.[186] Oman's is a theology that, far from marginalising the human, gives the human a determinative role in bringing home the reality of God. His theology has within it the core values of a liberationist perspective, where *praxis* supersedes theory. In these ways, Oman's theological vision, though born in another context and couched in often inaccessible language, has a contemporary ambience.

Another feature of Oman's work with contemporary resonance is its teleological pluralism. Though there is one reality behind all phenomena and one point of convergence in freedom and love, there is plurality of epistemological perspective. In the ascent of the mountain, others "will find the right way to be their own not yours" and "you will not shape your course by theirs, but you will hope to meet them farther on".[187] This pluralism is predicated on Oman's relegation of historical revelation from a position of exclusive authority to that of a milestone on an onward journey. As early as 1906, he commented:

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[185] Hood argues that it is "possible to misconstrue Oman's work and to think that he is arguing that the authentic believer is 'a tradition-neutral investigator, free from all prejudice and able to judge with supreme rationality'. *Baillie, Oman and Macmurray*, 178. The quotation is from Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 47.

[186] "Till we believe in Him there (in our next door neighbour) we cannot possibly believe in Him anywhere". *Grace and Personality*,154.

[187] *Vision and Authority*, Preface to Second Edition, 9.

> As an institution embodying ecclesiastical authority, as a visible Church, Christianity is only one amongst many temporal things, possibly the highest but scarcely the ultimate.[188]

It was surely a bold assertion to make in New College, Edinburgh, before a United Free Church audience; just four years before the World Missionary Conference which had a vision of winning the world for Christ within a generation. History has proved that prophetic nature of Oman's pluralistic vision as opposed to a Christian imperialism. John Hick is probably the most direct heir to Oman's vision and, more than any other pluralist theologian, he acknowledged Oman as an inspiration for his own work. Hick began his theological journey as a student for the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in England, in Westminster College, Cambridge. In his early monograph, *Faith and Knowledge*, Hick referred to Oman, saying:

> This account owes much to a philosopher of religion of the last generation whose works, perhaps because of their difficulty, do not at present receive the attention which they both merit and richly reward.[189]

Hick adds that he regarded his own essay as "an attempt to work out Oman's basic standpoint in relation to a very different world of contemporary philosophy".[190]Hick's admiration for Oman's theological enterprise has been long and sustained.[191]Oman lived in a mono-cultural Britain and the benefit of Hick's work is that it takes Oman's thinking into the practical field of inter-faith engagement and study. This is the place that Oman would have wished his ideas to be applied and tested, in the light of what Hick calls "the Real".[192]

Finally, one further aspect of Oman's work that may inspire the contemporary seeker is his spirituality. Notwithstanding his failure to appreciate the communion of

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[188] *Faith and Freedom*, 412.

[189] John Hick, *Faith and knowledge*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1957), 7.

[190] *Faith and Knowledge*, 7; also, quoted with comment by Healy in, Religion and Reality, 157.

[191] See John Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, Macmillan, 2006), 145. Hick makes the helpful comment that "supra-natural" is a more acceptable term today than "supernatural" and it elucidates Oman's idea of spiritual environment.

[192] *New Frontiers*, 162. For Hick, as with Oman, "transpersonal Reality is always and everywhere accessed, but is not forced upon consciousness…….experience of the Transcendent is neither univocal nor uniform", Page 146.

passivity in the mystical way, Oman provides radical piety of value to both those outside as well as inside the Church. Oman's theology of prayer is predicated upon the sanctification of the world in God. Prayer is conscious participation in the teleological realisation of God's will of love for all of creation. Essential to the dynamic of prayer is a reverent agnosticism. Prayer does not confirm holy certainties with respect to the working of the Almighty, save that of love; and even then the believer sees in a glass darkly. And, not confirming of holy certainty, the practice of prayer challenges prejudice. Prayer is openness to the sacred and the holy, to ever new insights into reality. To return to Oman's mountain analogy, prayer is a toe-hold on the steep slope; it is brave and adventurous because it trusts God not only for the way ahead, but for inevitable accident and misadventure. In Oman's theology, nothing is outside the love of God. Thus, prayer is the existential realisation of reconciliation to God in all things, in light and darkness, in life and in death, in terminal illness as in the beauty of autumn leaves.[193] Oman's theology of prayer offers a spirituality that has peace at its centre, because all things are sustained by God, and it has restlessness at its heart because the soul, the world, the Kingdom of God is a work in progress. Oman's theology of prayer will be helpful to those whose prayer life may have suffered shipwreck with the collapse of fundamentalist convictions, or it may prove helpful to someone who wishes to pray as a citizen of the world and who cannot subscribe to the particularity of institutional Christianity.

At the same time, Oman's theology of prayer stands in continuity with the piety of his roots. The sovereignty of God, the Cross as the highest symbol of divine power and need for a personal reconciliation to God's gracious purposes – these represent a line that stretches from the prayer meeting in Victoria Street Congregation to the spiritual needs of humanity today. As in all of Oman's theology, the Cross is primary because it is the symbol of the final sovereignty of love. In his own words, "the Cross is the symbol of the might which shall transform all things by transforming all hearts, the symbol of the everlasting order of conscious freedom in God's rule of

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[193] Robert Crockett, Session Clerk of Claremont Presbyterian Church in the Presbytery of Derry, remarked to me that autumn shows us that leaves are most beautiful when dead: a surely inspired counter cultural remark!

love".[194] In summary, prayer is the realisation of the power of love – historically revealed in the Cross, universally disclosed, but always theoretical, until authenticated in experience. Oman's theology of prayer is one way whereby his visionary perspective may be accessed.

In the end

Oman was a radical Christian who never gave his heart away to any particular theological system or ideology. His rugged individuality may have been the fruit of the road he travelled – from rural, mid-Victorian Orkney via the industrial revolution and the Great War to the eve of the Second World War. Oman kept his heart and, therefore, his thought was free to interact with the diverse landscapes, literal and spiritual, he traversed. His independence of mind may have been nurtured in his family experiences; his father, for example, refused the eldership after being elected by the congregation. His childhood experience of the numinous may have given him an early conviction that God is greater than any articulations of God. In any event, Oman brought to historical study a courage that, perhaps, in circumstances other than Westminster College, might well have been rewarded with charges of heresy. Oman, however, never regarded liberalism, as with Newman, a half-way house to atheism; but rather, a liberal mind was to Oman necessary for the quickening of faith, the radicalisation of piety and a fuller realisation of the transcendent mystery which religious people call God. Oman's contexts gave birth to the man, but the man transcended his contexts in the freedom of love. Oman remains a radical voice relevant to today.

Total number of words: 89,766

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[194] *Vision and Authority*, 337.

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